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Form and Function: The Dependent Beauty of Design

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ABSTRACT. Design, which has until recently been almost entirely neglected by philosophical aesthetics, is nevertheless an apt object of aesthetic appraisal that deserves consideration. This paper argues that we can and do make aesthetic judgements of designed objects, and that these judgements differ from our responses to art and natural beauty in significant ways. An aesthetics of design requires an integrative approach, where the purposive elements of an object have an ineluctable aesthetic component, and where our aesthetic judgements of the object are inseparable from our appraisal of how well it fulfills its function. Such an approach can best begin with Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty in section 16 of *The Critique of Judgement*, and an interpretation of that section is developed here.

Design is, well, just about everywhere. As Gert Selle has put it, “we swim in a pool of design”.¹ From the bicycle to the office cubicle, from the toaster to the ipod, there is almost no part of our contemporary lives that has not been designed, manipulated and manufactured, and few of our daily activities that do not interact with design in some direct way. I would hazard that for those of us living in large urban centers, designed objects are far more prevalent in our lives than fine art, craft or even raw nature. Nevertheless, design has been almost entirely neglected by philosophical aesthetics. This strikes me as a grave omission, for if other aspects of our lives and experiences can be said to have an aesthetic dimension, surely this one does too. My sense of this neglect is what has led me to consider design, for I think that it is indeed an apt object of aesthetic appraisal. The question is what a theory of design as an aesthetic phenomenon would require.

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¹ Gert Selle, *Design im Alltag*. Cited in Mads Nygaard Folkmann, *The Aesthetics of Imagination in Design* (MIT Press, 2013), p.159.

The first requirement is to distinguish design from other aesthetic categories, like fine art and craft, if it is to merit separate treatment. This is a metaphysical task, that seeks to define design as a particular kind of activity or object. I will say little about this here, other than to note that my focus is on our aesthetic responses to designed objects rather than on the practice of designing itself. However we describe the activity of design—as involved in solving problems, or engaged in innovation, or satisfying perceived needs, and so on—and however expressive or creative the practice may be, it typically results in the production (and often mass-production) of functional objects with specific purposes they are meant to fulfill. In this regard, I am interested in commonplace things, like the sofas, teapots and razors that are part of our everyday lives, rather than the branded, the famous or the transgressive designs that are acclaimed in design competitions and displayed in design museums. I am interested in our aesthetic experiences of design as it intersects with our daily lives; it is these quotidian and functional objects that have been largely overlooked by the discipline.

Secondly, a theory of design must show how our interactions with designed objects can be specifically aesthetic, and differentiate these from, again, our experiences of other kinds of things. For I do think that they differ, in often significant ways. My response to a sunset is not the same as that to a great work of art, and is different again when I appraise a chair or car for its aesthetic or design excellence. It is this second requirement that I will focus on here. In my work, I presuppose that we do have aesthetic experiences of designed objects, and that we make aesthetic judgements about them.² The task is to construct a theory that captures what is specific to these responses, in a way that highlights their aesthetic character but that also faithfully reflects the nature of designed objects themselves. The question I would like to ask, is in what way, if any, can a bicycle or a chair be said to be beautiful? My term of choice here is beauty, although some more general notion of aesthetic value will do just as well. Wherein lies the beauty of a coffeepot or a razor? For these are primarily functional objects—the bicycle is meant to get us from A to B, the pot to make coffee—and as such are intended to be actively used rather than merely admired.

² See my *Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

One possible suggestion is that the aesthetic value of these objects is separable from their purposes; that beauty is an ‘added value’ that some designs possess, and when they do, this value is the same as that found in sunsets, flowers and all other things. Such an approach, as we find with Robert Stecker’s defense of the autonomy of aesthetic value, has the benefit of claiming a purity and consistency to beauty as independent from other values and also from the types of objects we experience. As Stecker claims, aesthetic value can be “realized in different ways in different media but it cannot be a different value in different media”.³ This approach provides one reason for the neglect of design: if beauty is the same everywhere, designed objects would require no special consideration. But I assert that traditional aesthetics cannot account for the beauty of design in such a simple or straightforward way, for this limits the aesthetic value of design to the surface qualities an object has, such as its ornamentation or decoration—the way it looks—and ignores its functional properties altogether. And I think it unlikely that we thus appraise a bicycle with no consideration or knowledge of its purpose, or laud a toaster’s design if it always burns the toast.

Instead, I suggest that the aesthetics of design requires us to adopt a more integrative approach, where the purposive elements of an object have an ineluctable aesthetic component, and where our aesthetic judgments of the object are inseparable from our appraisal of how well it fulfills its function. And I think that this approach can be found with Kant’s brief discussion of dependent beauty. Kant claims that there are two *kinds* of beauty, free and dependent beauty. Let me quote him from section 16 of the *Critique of Judgement*.

The first [free beauty] presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith. The first is called the (self-subsistent) beauty of this or that thing; the second, as dependent upon a concept...is ascribed to objects which come under the concept of a particular purpose.⁴

³ Robert Stecker, “Aesthetic Value Defended”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.70 (2012): 355-362, p.361.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard, (Hafner Publishing, 1972), p.65

Dependent beauty involves three further interrelated factors: concepts, purpose, and perfection—that, once unpacked, I think can provide us with an integrated model for the beauty of design. I read Kant as claiming that dependent beauty is a species of the genus that is beauty or aesthetic judgement writ large. That is, Kant was primarily concerned with the logical structure of judgements of taste in general, and sought to delineate their transcendental requirements. He sought the solution to a theoretical problem and, once having solved it (at least to his satisfaction), could then turn to the much messier business of how our actual aesthetic judgements rarely achieve the purity and autonomy of the ideal, how the faculties of the mind rarely work in such complete isolation from each other, and how our responses to the world more often contain a mixture of knowledge, pleasure, and desire. While in theory we can make a pure judgement of free beauty about anything—a sunset, a bicycle, a tree—in reality we rarely do. As Marcia Eaton has noted, “‘pure’, conceptless...uses of ‘beauty’ are rare...[It] has been a mistake for aestheticians to take this sense of beauty as the paradigm aesthetic concept”.⁵ I wish to suggest that the greater part of our aesthetic judgements of design—indeed the most appropriate form they should take—is that of dependent rather than free beauty.

The problem of section 16 is how to reconcile the autonomy of free beauty with the addition of the concepts of purpose and perfection, for they seem to contradict the non-cognitive, disinterested pleasure of beauty in general. One way to address this problem is to understand the conceptual component of dependent beauty as backgrounded in our aesthetic judgements. As Philip Mallaband has noted, all experiences have conceptual aspects, even if these are sometimes quite thin—no experience takes place in a conceptual void. Thus according to Mallaband, when we experience a sunset, for example, we make no conscious determinations about the object in front of us—its appearance is sufficient for us to judge it (freely) beautiful. But with other things this is not enough: a judgement of dependent beauty is what Mallaband calls “thick” because it requires greater knowledge of the object in question. A conceptually thin experi-

⁵ Marcia Muelder Eaton, “Kantian and Contextual Beauty”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.57 (1999): 11-15, p.13.

ence of a razor or tractor, for instance, may not yield a judgement of beauty because we are just “not disposed to respond with pleasure”⁶ to these kinds of objects. But with the addition of conceptual background we may indeed allow that they have aesthetic value.

This is a good beginning, but this conceptual knowledge cannot be just any garden-variety set of concepts, such as the height, weight, location and so on of a bicycle. Instead, the concepts presupposed in our aesthetic judgements must refer to the object’s purpose, and also its perfection, as Kant stated at the beginning of section 16. By purpose, Kant does not mean the use to which an object might be put, but rather refers to an object that was created or designed according to a plan—to make *this* thing and not another—and this plan is the realization of a given concept or function that precedes the object’s existence, i.e.: that it is meant to be a bicycle or a tractor, and operate as bikes and tractors generally do. Perfection refers to whether the object is any good—not morally good, or good for satisfying a particular need we may have at the time, but good *as* fulfilling its purpose, or being a good thing of its kind. The conceptual background of judgements of dependent beauty is thus circumscribed in these two ways: we must have knowledge of the function of the object, and of its success in achieving that function.⁷ Only then will we make an aesthetic judgement of the appropriate logical form, or call a given thing beautiful.

It will be quickly apparent why dependent beauty seems to be a useful model for an integrative approach to design because of its attention to the purpose of designed objects, and its required evaluation of their achievement in meeting this purpose. We need to know both what a toaster is, and whether it always, or never, burns the toast in order to appraise it aesthetically. But this model is incomplete. Aesthetic judgements for Kant are made about the way things appear to us, and whether that visual experience produces the right kind of (disinterested, intellectual) pleasure.

⁶ Philip Mallaband, “Understanding Kant’s Distinction Between Free and Dependent Beauty”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.52 (2002):66-81, p.81.

⁷ Kant allows that we can make judgements of the dependent beauty of objects of nature, like horses, and in these cases we treat them as objectively purposive rather than as really having purposes. Designed objects, as functional, require knowledge of their actual purposes more specifically.

Dependent beauty, with its particular requirements, seems to mire us in a problem of the relation between appearance, or form, and function, and is inconclusive as to how the two work together in our appraisal of design. After all, if this conceptual knowledge is mere background, it seems that it is also aesthetically *irrelevant*—it enables us to make judgements of beauty but does not contribute directly to the substance of those judgements.

Paul Guyer, in one of his earlier works, developed a negative account of an object's purposive features, whereby these impose a "constraint on the freedom of the imagination" in our response to them.⁸ That is, if an object fails to fulfill its function, we will not find it beautiful. But, having met these adequacy conditions about its purpose, we can then respond to the object with the appropriate free play of the faculties Kant has described. The problem with this account, as Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson have noted, is that function does not contribute positively to our aesthetic judgements as "one of its constitutive components"⁹ but merely restricts the kinds of things that we respond to aesthetically. Guyer is correct that we will not find failed designs beautiful—if the toaster does not fulfill its purpose of toasting bread, this will indeed constrain our aesthetic responses to it. But, as a number of toasters do perform adequately, or even well, it seems that for Guyer our aesthetic judgements of them are left to respond to their formal qualities alone.

What we need is to make room for a more positive contribution of purpose and perfection as sources of dependent beauty. In a later paper, Guyer concedes this point.¹⁰ We can find this fuller integration in our appreciation of designed objects if we include attention to what Robert Wicks has called their 'teleological' or 'functional' style—that is, the *way* in which they fulfill their purposes. Thus a bicycle, to be adequate, must have

⁸ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.220. It is Robert Wicks who called Guyer's account "negative" but Guyer in a later exchange did not disagree with this appellation. See Robert Wicks, "Dependent Beauty as the Appreciation of Teleological Style" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.55 (1997): 387-400, p.389; and Paul Guyer, "Dependent Beauty Revisited: A Reply to Wicks" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.57 (1999): 357-361.

⁹ Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 23.

¹⁰ Paul Guyer, "Free and Dependent Beauty: A Modest Proposal", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol.42 (2002): 357-366.

two wheels, a seat, and a steering mechanism. Without meeting these conditions, as Guyer noted, the object will fail as a bicycle (although it might succeed as a unicycle) and we will not judge it to be beautiful. But beyond these minimal requirements, bicycles fulfill their functions in a number of ways: some have gears, some have racks; fixed gear bikes have no brakes while coaster bikes have brakes in the hub of their rear wheels; recumbent bikes have a very different form from their upright cousins and so on. In our appraisals, Wicks claims that “we *compare* alternative means to a single purpose”—such as getting from A to B on two wheels—as we reflect upon the contingency of the object’s form as it realizes this purpose.¹¹

The free play of the faculties in Kant’s judgements of dependent beauty is thus a play between the various ways an object might be designed and produced, without reaching a determinative conclusion about it. We do not yet have a perfect bicycle, if we ever will, (although we have some good ones), hence our conceptual knowledge of the object is not yet fixed.¹² But we can compare extant bicycles, and appreciate their various forms as attempts to fulfill their purposes with perfection, or as emergent from their functional requirements. In this way, the conceptual knowledge required for dependent beauty is not merely backgrounded but plays an integral part in our aesthetic responses to design. Form and function are thus intimately linked: the purpose of an object sets constraints on the kinds of forms it can take—two wheels rather than one, for example—and the additional notion of perfection suggests that our approbations of a design will depend upon how successfully its form contributes to its achieving this acknowledged purpose.

With this in hand, we can return to my earlier objectives, and to the requirements for a theory of design. I had said at the outset that our responses to design differ from our responses to other kinds of things. With the model I propose here, we can see that the beauty of design is not an ‘added value’ that some objects possess, nor does it refer merely to the superficial look of things, such as their decorative features alone. Because designs are functional objects, their functions will be aesthetically relevant

¹¹ Robert Wicks, “Dependent Beauty”, p.393.

¹² Bicycles break down: their breaks fail, their tires go flat, their chains come off, they rust. We can imagine a perfect bicycle as one that never fails but we have not yet produced one and do not know what it would look like.

to our appraisals, even though they are not our only considerations. A further word still needs to be said, though, about the integration of function and form and their respective contributions to our aesthetic judgements.

For one thing, I am not advocating a kind of ‘functional beauty’ which suggests, as Andy Hamilton has noted, that an object which does its intended job well is aesthetically valuable *in virtue of* this fact.¹³ This stresses function to the exclusion of form. My vice grips, for example, do an excellent job of gripping and stabilizing objects, and I take a certain satisfaction in their performance. But I would not claim that they are beautiful. In fact, I would make no aesthetic appraisal of them at all. If pressed, I would probably call them ugly, albeit useful. Performing well can bring an object to our attention, but if and when we make an *aesthetic* judgement about it, as opposed to a practical, or moral or economic judgement, for instance, this will address its features as they emerge from, and respond to, its functional requirements. Form does not *follow* function as secondary or even as extraneous. But form arises from function as the contingent way in which a purposive object has been made. And when we address an object’s form, we do so within the framework of its particular intended function.

Here, the kind or amount of conceptual knowledge that informs our aesthetic judgements is important. For me, vice-grips are mostly a useful tool for unscrewing tight caps on bottles. I am not very handy around the house. For a professional craftsperson, with knowledge of and appreciation for her tools, vice-grips may indeed be judged beautiful.¹⁴ For someone who has never used or seen vice-grips before, they can be at best freely but not dependently beautiful. Familiarity, or the extent of our knowledge of an object, is going to affect the kinds of judgements we can make about it. But this is a question of who is competent to judge in a given case, and not a question of which designs are actually beautiful. The knowledge relevant to judgements of the beauty of design will be historically and culturally specific, and it will be the case that the more we know about a given object, the better placed we will be to assess it, when

¹³ Andy Hamilton, “The Aesthetics of Design: Problem-solving versus Fashion and Design”, accessed June 25, 2015 at <http://www.academia.edu/11976004/AestheticsofDesign>. I do not mean to suggest that Hamilton endorses this view.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Beth Savickey for making this point to me.

we make a judgement of its aesthetic value. So function informs our judgements but will do so in varying degrees, depending on the extent of our familiarity with, or use of, the object in question.

Finally, we can ask if function ever follows form in our judgements, as with the case of ornamentation, or designs that have purely decorative but clearly non-functional features. In some cases, ornamentation *is* functionally relevant, if we consider china cabinets or vases that are meant to decorate our homes as much as to hold dishes or flowers. How they look is as important for fulfilling *their* purposes as elegance or grace are irrelevant to my vice-grips fulfilling theirs. But there do remain some objects, the purely formal features of which seem to lie outside of their functions, and the role of their forms needs to be accounted for.

A recent trend in North America, for example, has been the marketing of tools that are pink, presumably to appeal to women consumers. And the painted-on colour of a hammer or pair of vice-grips is surely incidental to what they are, or what they are meant to do. But colour may well be incidental to a judgement of the dependent beauty of design as well. Some objects come in a range of colours in order to, as the ads suggest, 'appeal to a range of tastes'. And desire, or personal preference, is explicitly excluded from a Kantian theory of aesthetic judgement. We can make a number of different kinds of judgements about the same object; one of these is a judgement of free beauty that responds to the pure look of a thing. One of these is what Eva Schaper has called a gustatory judgement, or a judgement of personal taste (and what Kant calls a judgement of the agreeable or pleasant).¹⁵ I might simply not *like* pink, and so reject the hammer on these (personal, subjective) grounds. Or I may be offended by the marketing strategy and reject the hammer on moral grounds. But when making these other kinds of judgements, I am not making a bona fide aesthetic judgement about the beauty of the hammer's design.

How well form and function are integrated in a particular object is *itself* a consideration in our judgements of design beauty. Some objects we may deem overly decorative to their detriment, a criticism often levied against the Rococo, for instance, as much as against the pink hammer. Other ob-

¹⁵ Eva Schaper, "The Pleasures of Taste", *Pleasure, Preference and Value* (Cambridge University Press, 1987): 39-56.

jects may be deemed too starkly functional, as some critics of modernism have suggested. An ideal blend of form and function is part of the striving for perfection that we assess in a judgement of the teleological style that comprises the dependent beauty of design. So-called “classic” designs, such as Henry Beck’s map of the London Underground, an Eames’ chair, or Earl Dean’s contour bottle for Coca-Cola, are classic precisely because they have achieved a clear harmony of form and function in their realization.

Let me conclude. I set out to show how our interactions with design can be specifically aesthetic, and how these differ from our responses to other kinds of things. Using the Kantian notion of dependent beauty, I have sought to build a model that integrates form and function, and that reflects the nature of design as purposive. But I have also said that I am interested in design as it intersects with our daily lives. One of the consequences of the integrative approach I am offering is that, in order to make a full assessment of a given design’s beauty, we have to know the object and we also have to *use* it to determine whether it achieves its intended purpose (It can’t just *look* as though it would work). Thus, displays in museums offer only partial, or even alienating, aesthetic experiences of designed objects. If we cannot touch and use the items in question, (just as when we do not know what they are meant to be) we can make judgements of their free beauty, or we can treat them as though they were akin to works of art, but we cannot make judgements of their beauty *as* designs. Design is at times mundane and unexceptional, and is often overlooked. We do not always approach our cars, toothbrushes or cubicles with admiration. We do not always make moral judgements about our environs and its objects either: an aesthetic response is but one form of response we can make to designed objects. But it is one that we do make, and insofar as we do, design has a role to play in aesthetic theory broadly understood.

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