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A Reflection on the Criteria for Identifying Design

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to broaden the account of the aesthetic experience of design objects proposed by Jane Forsey (2013) by leveraging such objects' technological origin. Forsey's theory focuses on the conditions by which it is possible to aesthetically evaluate a design object as beautiful compared to other objects that perform the same function. The present account questions if Forsey's proposal is genuinely a theory of beauty *particular to design*, or if it is a theory of beauty of craft that adapts to design. To pose this question is to highlight the industrial origin as a valuable factor in design's aesthetic experience. This factor is usually considered in negative terms due to its immediate connection to mass consumption. Mass production is taken to emphasize a flat aestheticization and the standardization of consumers due to its depersonalizing effect. This type of explanation implies a hierarchy where the aesthetic experience of crafted objects is richer than the experience of mechanically produced artifacts. In this article, I suggest that the privileged position of the aesthetics of design allows to seek the positive aspects of the aesthetic experience of technological means.

1. Introduction

Jane Forsey (2013) proposes the sphere of design objects as a valid

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category for an analysis that brings out everyday life's aesthetic dimension. Her proposal fits in the developing trend that consists of going beyond traditional aesthetics understood as the Philosophy of Art, i.e., Everyday Aesthetics (EA), a theoretical paradigm that overflows into everyday life. However, it should be specified that Forsey places herself among EA scholars who do not deem it necessary to venture into new philosophical conceptualization to establish what is aesthetic in the everyday. Such an approach holds on to the philosophical tradition as a fertile ground that allows us to turn to the aesthetic dimension of the daily round of activities and its objects (expansive approach).² For this reason, Forsey finds no obstacles in expanding the Kantian theory of beauty to a new category of objects: objects of design.

2. Intuitively identifying Design

In her book *The Aesthetics of Design* (2013), Forsey examines with particular attention what we intuitively understand as "design" against the backdrop of definitions of art and craft in circulation. After the analysis, Forsey proposes the following working definition: "Design [...] is functional, immanent, mass-produced, and mute" (Forsey, 2013, p.68). This definition suggests that the scope of her aesthetics of design is "an *object*" (Forsey, 2013, p.19) rather than the design process behind it. Moreover, this object differs from what we commonly understand as art and crafts for the four features listed

² Among others, Thomas Leddy and Sherry Irvin.

above. First of all, a design object must fulfill a function; it must be a functional object. Secondly, this object must be something we encounter in everyday life, such as a pen, a coffee cup, or a toothbrush; it is a kind of object that does not encompass “the transcendent or the profound” (Forsey, 2013, p.17), so it is immanent. So far, these characteristics could also refer to the ceramic cup we bought in an artisan workshop; therefore, Forsey urges to specify that a design object is also a mass product: “Design is an emergent twentieth-century phenomenon that depends on the means of mass production in a way that art and craft do not.” (Forsey, 2013, p.23) Finally, design objects are not designed to convey content that the end-user must interpret as he would do in front of a Duchamp. In everyday life, a urinal is a urinal; it is mute.

Being functional, immanent, mass-produced, and mute, in other words, very *ordinary*, how dare we call design beautiful? Jane Forsey does not feel uncomfortable describing the experience of design’s beauty with “the somewhat emphatic conceptual language inherited from the philosophy of the past.” (Vattimo, 1998, p.67)

3. The Beauty of Design

Jane Forsey proposes an aesthetics of design based on the appraisal of the object because of “the perfection in the way it fulfills its purpose” (Forsey, 2013, p.162) in connection to the Kantian notion of “dependent beauty” (*pulchritudo adhaerens*).

This notion is the starting point supporting the expansive approach in EA and for a general renewal of Kantian aesthetics. In fact, in addition to establishing a debate with everyday aestheticians, Forsey's proposal enters into dialogue with the long tradition that has tried to update the Kantian notion of beauty beyond its limitations linked to eighteenth-century taste. The main argument in this direction is that the notion of dependent beauty, and the judgment related to it, is the most pervasive in everyday life. Still, traditional aesthetics has been mainly concerned with the Kantian notion of *free beauty*.³ Free beauty, says Forsey, is an exceptional event on which Kant has invested a good part of the *Third Critique* precisely because of its rarity. In contrast, the more common dependent beauty represents the norm. Given the ubiquity of design, Forsey can say that "design exemplifies the way that anything at all can be experienced aesthetically, [and] that these experiences can be more common and intimate than those of art." (Forsey, 2013, p.246)

I am not going to develop this issue in detail. Still, it is worth explaining Kant's distinction between free beauty and dependent beauty briefly, as presented in the *Critique of Judgement*.⁴

3 Famous is the attack by Hans Georg Gadamer, who identified the playful element of art "as a self-movement that does not pursue any particular end or purpose," thus excluding from the horizon of beauty "the secondary forms of the decorative arts and crafts." (Vitta, 2011:27; Ref. Gadamer, 1986:23)

4 All quotations from Kant follow the English translations by Werner S. Pluhar in 1987 Hackett edition (see bibliography).

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There are two kinds of beauty, free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) and merely accessory beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept. The free kinds of beauty are called (self-subsistent) beauties of this or that thing. The other kind of beauty is accessory to a concept (i.e., it is conditioned beauty) and as such is attributed to objects that fall under the concept of a particular purpose. (Kant, 1987:77)

Real flowers, but also decorative wallpapers and music without topic are for Kant objects that we judge independently from their purposes since they “mean nothing on their own.” (Kant, 1987, p.77) Buildings and horses (today we would probably say “cars”) are evaluated aesthetically dependent on “the concept of the purpose that determines what the thing is [meant] to be” (Kant, 1987, p.77); that is, its functionality. Forsey, following Kant, claims that we can aesthetically appreciate a specific chair because it performs excellently compared to other chairs we have sat on. She claims that “its beauty comes to light only through everyday use, and only when it succeeds in performing its function to a degree that merits our approbation” (Forsey, 2013, p.242) and “this appreciation is the kind of aesthetic judgment that is *particular to design*. Design excellence is extraordinary in the sense that some objects are better than the norm.” (Forsey, 2013, p.241; emphasis added)

Moreover, dependent beauty presupposes adherence to the concept of what the object must be (e.g. “mug,” “chair,” “telephone,” “bathtub”), and the perfection of the object concerning this concept. Forsey is explicit about the fact that

[d]esigns [...] have specific purposes devised by their creators, and if we are to judge them dependently beautiful [...], we must know what these purposes are and whether they fulfill them reasonably well, or perfectly. [...] if we are presented with an object whose function we cannot determine, we can only, at best, find it freely beautiful if at all. (Forsey, 2013, p.171)

One doubt arises. Formulated in this way, could not the appraisal be equally addressed to an object of craftsmanship? How can Forsey declare that this judgment is *particular to design* objects?

4. Rich experience of craft and deficient experience of design

In the space of this section, it is worth quoting a more extended passage from *The Aesthetics of Design*, where the Canadian philosopher distinguishes between an aesthetic judgment of craft objects and an aesthetic judgment of designs:

[...] the free play of the faculties when faced with a work of craft will consider the contingency of the way that object fulfills its function *by means of* the individual skill at creating it from a

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given raw material. With judgements of design, we do not attend to this aspect of the object: we feel no individual hand at work when we appraise a laptop computer or a car, and we do not judge it according to how a single individual has manipulated some raw material to produce it. (Forsey, 2013, p.180)

Our appreciation of design lacks regard for the craftsman's manual skills since a machine produced the object.

Two issues might be raised here.

(1) Is our feeling, thus described, justified? If something looks handmade, it does not necessarily mean it is. As a matter of fact, advanced technologies can replicate a “manual” touch on products. Typical is the case of ceramics. The ceramic glazing process, even if applied industrially, results as unique and different for each product. Moreover, ceramic products that are manually glazed and decorated are often the result of industrial molds. I will not elaborate on this aspect here, but I hope the next section will render it more explicit.

(2) The aesthetic judgment thus formulated by Forsey is none other than a theory of beauty of craft, which adapts to design by removing the acknowledgment of “the individual (hand) behind that object's manufacture.” (Forsey, 2013, p.180) In this sense, we have a proposal of a theory of taste for design in negative terms. Therefore,

this consideration would suffice to exclude the possibility of considering Forsey's proposal as properly relating to design.

What could be a formulation that indeed does justice to the design object? Can this feeling of “no individual hand at work” be seen in favorable terms? Does recognizing that an object is mechanically produced have a positive effect on its appraisal? Even Forsey herself acknowledges that “Design is an emergent twentieth-century phenomenon that depends on the means of mass production in a way that art and craft do not.” (Forsey, 2013, p.23) Is it possible that all her enthusiasm for design pales in the face of the *impersonal* nature of its creation? Isn't it perhaps the beauty of unspoiled nature that teaches us that the display of human skills is not always to be appraised?

5. Positivity in industrial production?

The philosophical tradition that has seen in technological development a reason for decreeing a crisis of cultural values, often in negative terms, is long. Those philosophers that dealt with the industrial revolution—the historical origin of design—have mainly put pressure on this crisis's negative aspects for the arts. Educated to this approach, even contemporary interpreters appoint industrial production value in terms of negative significance, mostly by identifying its products by their commodity character, which manifests bogus aesthetic traits. This perspective has led to theorize the

widespread aestheticization of contemporary society and the collapse of high art. The products of the industry—mass-produced industrial products, or, more simply, design—from the very beginning, emerged as a philistine threat to the noble purpose of the arts.

In the second phase of his thought, Walter Benjamin emphasized the implications of the new technological advancements that favored the mechanical reproducibility of images in the form of photography and cinema. According to the German philosopher, these processes have involved a change in the perception and attention to art. The well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” from 1935 refers specifically to photography and cinematographic images. Still, we can read his conclusions bearing in mind also mass-produced everyday objects. An essential issue for Benjamin is the loss of art's cultural value—uniqueness and authenticity, the *hic et nunc*, which he identified with the *aura*—in favor of an exhibition value, intended for the masses. In other words, the visibility of the image (and the object) becomes more important than its existence. (Mecacci, 2012, p.115) When the image/object is devised to be mechanically produced, i.e., it is already re-produced at birth, the idea of its authenticity vanishes. Suppose we want to make a parallel similar to what Benjamin proposes. In that case, we can say that we have moved from handcrafted objects' auratic experience towards the distracted

experience of design objects⁵, which feeds consumption—the shame of contemporary society. This is the negative idea that generally remains impressed by a superficial reading of Benjamin's text.

Another question, closely related to mechanical production and reproducibility, is the obsolescence of objects related to market laws. More specifically, obsolescence addresses the loss of performance and economic value that everyday objects suffer due to changes in fashion or technological advancements. It is precisely this language that Karl Marx uses in his lecture on the obsolescence of goods in the early twentieth century. As he mentioned in his early writings, especially in “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” this obsolescence finds its place in the dialectic between production and consumption, which generated, in the philosophical discourse, the well-known equivalence between design objects and semiotic fetishism. (Baudrillard, 1981)

Not to mention how Marx made the socio-cultural implications of industrial production public and shared in the collective imagination with the concept of alienation, which arises precisely from the factory. This awareness of the crisis of that era still conditions our approach to things produced in factories and elevates a curtain of artistic individualism around the craft workshop, with its well-aligned tools and the craftsman's hands who carefully shape the rough material.

⁵ It must be emphasized that Walter Benjamin postulates the distracted perception of the mass as the genuine experience of architectural work, and such can also be the genuine experience of other functional objects, i.e., design objects.

This image evokes John Ruskin's criticism of the industry. The often-quoted passage from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* reads as follows: "all cast and machine work is bad, as work. [...] a piece of terra cotta or of plaster of Paris, which has been wrought by the human hand, is worth all the stone in Carrara, cut by machinery." (Ruskin, 1849, p.81,84) In other words, the elimination of any manual intervention by the designer contributed to the utmost impersonality of design—an impersonality also reflected in the standardization of form and function. All this invests, still today, the general image of design with a specific "cynical power," as a machine that produces needs for an anonymous mass.

Nevertheless, as Rafael Cardoso has noted, there is a habit of misinterpreting Ruskin's thought on design exclusively "as constituting an attack on industry and a defense of handicraft." (Cardoso, 2010, p.325). If at the dawn of industrialization, it is true that Ruskin saw machines as a threat, later, his criticism was mainly aimed at factory work as inhumane and not at mechanical production per se. Cardoso stresses that there have been several shifts in industrial paradigms throughout history whose implications are rarely considered. For example, regarding the industrial developments of the early twentieth century, Cardoso points out how public opinion towards industrial production has changed, resulting in the recognition that "industrial artifacts possess an elegance and integrity of their own, quite divorced from any considerations of the nobility of handwork. The perfection of mass-production technology signaled a

new perfectibility for industrial artifacts; and designers would henceforth play the key role in ensuring that machine work was as attractive as it was efficient and cheap.” (Cardoso, 2010, p.327) For a more recent example, it should suffice considering the quality attributed in the second half of the twenty-first century to Japanese industrial production: walkman, stereos, kitchen utensils produced then still work today.

This brief listing intends to bring out a specific bias of perception towards industrial products that has not changed to date, but it is unfounded, or at least simplistic despite everything. Demonizing rhetoric has led to creating a “tired dichotomy” between craftsmanship and design, which still resonates in a common hierarchical perception of the nobility of craftsmanship and the machine product's crudeness. (Cardoso, 2010) This hierarchization depends on the fact that, as the Italian historian Renato De Fusco (1999) has pointed out, design has lacked an apparatus that would promote its culture for a long time. The design museum's phenomenon is something very recent, and, unfortunately, still mimics the exhibition strategies that pertain to art, focusing on displays suitable for contemplation rather than addressing what properly belongs to design: functionality and its technological valence. Thus, design is promoted as an appealing layer to conceal objects' industrial and commercial complexion. Yet, it is not true that the way how a design objects look is divorced from the way how they are made, we are just not acquainted with it.

If Everyday Aesthetics, in Forsey's understanding and in its systematic vocation, wants to start from design must be sensitive to the technological condition, which allows to acknowledge the plurality of taste and to counter the tendency to reduce the aesthetic discourse on design to the phenomenon of aestheticization. The latter results from approaching design from the point of view of a "commodity aesthetics" that is inherently destined to see design in its mere capitalist vocation since it does not distinguish between *means of production* and *medium of production*. The first term, as has been intended in the philosophical tradition, accentuates the question of mass production and distribution; on the contrary, reformulating the issue in terms of *the medium* requires a specific aesthetic theory to define its modes of appreciation. It will then be possible to revalue the question of the aesthetic experience of mass-produced everyday objects. This does not necessarily mean focusing on medium-specificity to feed the old debate on the ontology of art forms for which design, as an art form, needs to be interpreted as a reflection on technology.⁶ The appeal I propose is only meant to underline that we appreciate, and are fascinated by, how design objects are produced.

This approach also has additional benefits. The aesthetics of design has an advantage over other aesthetics because it has privileged access to the technological question. In other words, an

⁶ This has already been done by the Futurists in Italy and the Constructivists in Russia in the early 20th century, and today it is extensively covered by the hybrid form of ArtDesign.

account for the appreciation of the outcome of advanced technological mediums might start with design.

Moreover, thus supplemented aesthetic theory of design allows to get closer to the well-established Philosophy of Design, as the design theorist Victor Margolin (2015) suggested in his review of Forsey's book.

6. Conclusion

Jane Forsey succeeds in her task of showing that the everyday must not be plundered of its aesthetic dimension. By proposing an aesthetic theory of design, justified by the ubiquity of industrially mass-produced products—design objects—, the Canadian philosopher shifts the focus of aesthetic theory away from the fine arts, especially by highlighting how functionality can give rise to a sense of aesthetic fulfillment.

Despite this, I identified in her proposal a certain sense of nostalgia for artisan traditions, which renders her philosophical project a negative aesthetic theory of design. Instead, it would be more fruitful for a positive theory of design, without diminishing the role of craftsmanship, to promote the same attention to the industrial dimension of design.

Understandably, Forsey is careful not to fall into the trope of aestheticizing technology. Nevertheless, having made it clear that the appreciation of art is not the measure for the appreciation of everything else, and that an investigation of design deserves to go

beyond the conventional forms of artistic expression, aesthetics thus understood can acknowledge a positive appreciation for industrially made products.

The problem may lay in defining (intuitively) design in terms of mass production (Forsey, 2013, p.23), which brings with it a number of issues. The adjectival modifier “mass” in “mass production” implies, not a distinction between design and craftsmanship,⁷ or between design and art,⁸ but mass distribution, consumerism, and distracted attention. Forsey avoids in her text the first two issues, making a compelling argument against the absolutization of distracted attention—the fading in the background of everyday objects. She claims, against Martin Heidegger’s tool analysis (Heidegger, 1996), that “it is not only when they break down that [objects] come to our attention: we also notice things when they work extremely well.” (Forsey, 2013, p.241) In fact, re-proposing Kant’s theory and the theory of adherent beauty shows how there is a genuine intellectual pleasure even behind such objects.

Despite this, it seems more intuitive, particularly if we want to keep a distinction between the perception of handicraft objects and design objects, to deal with the *industrial* condition of such objects. Understanding design in these terms has two advantages.

Firstly, it acknowledges a distinction between the consequences of mass distribution for aesthetic perception and *how* the result of an

⁷ Mass produced objects involving textiles (sofas, shoes, and the like) are often hand-sewn.

⁸ See: Carroll, N. (Spring, 1997) “The Ontology of Mass Art” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 2, Perspectives on the Arts and Technology, pp. 187-199.

industrial medium is appreciated. The design product is a mass product as long as technology allows it. However, since technology already allows non-mass production, we cannot reduce the understanding of design to the "mass" condition.

Secondly, it supports a historical account of design, according to which the technological development of industrial production methods is decisive for granting a certain object the status of design. This becomes fundamental, especially if we want to establish a fruitful dialogue between philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of design.

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