

Beautiful Beings: Aesthetics in Industrial Design and Cultural Studies

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Introduction

In common parlance, the term design is often considered to be synonymous with style. For designers, however, imparting good form is only one in the series of events that signify the process. This incongruity between the audience perception of design and the view from within the profession may, at least partially, be blamed on the way popular media reads and represents design. And, as the most accessible dimension of any object is its form, until it is acquired, used and assimilated into people's lives, the primary responses to its material presence revolve mostly around its visual attributes. The visibility of designed goods in newspaper advice columns, magazines, television shows, museums and stores has brought one aspect of design activity to the forefront: aesthetics. Everyday objects, aestheticized by the rock stars of design are available in large quantities not only at specialized outlets, but also at stores where the majority of the American population shops. Virginia Postrel (2003) catalogs the increasing attention being lavished on the beautification of retail environments, houses, products and graphics, suggests that this might be the age of aesthetics. If there is indeed a higher emphasis on surface and appearance in our built environments, an examination of aesthetics from a social and cultural perspective is crucial.

Prevalence of the Pretty: Aesthetics in Popular Consciousness

As prime drivers of consumerism, beauty and desire are manifest all around us in various material and ephemeral forms. Makeover shows on television, the profusion of beauty magazines on newsstands, growing sizes of suburban malls, outlet stores and gymnasiums, increased availability of "designer" goods, widespread obsession with low-carbohydrate body-conscious diets, societal embrace of Botox and cosmetic surgery, all signify an obsession with appearance in popular consciousness. Several reasons have been cited for this phenomenon, and according to Postrel, it is the "recent cultural, business and technological changes [that] are reinforcing the prominence of aesthetics and the value of personal expression." (2003, p. 39). Beauty is peddled incessantly and peddled hard to consumers through products, buildings, interior spaces and the media. In case of the heightened awareness of aesthetics in products, some of the responsible factors may be higher salaries combined with lower prices of goods, shorter design and production cycles, faster hardware, better software and wider networks, the opening up of Asian economies (particularly China and India) and the growth of a culture that is increasingly more material. The focus of this article, however, is not on factors that have enlarged the presence of aesthetics in the public consciousness but some of the ways in which this may be interpreted from the perspective of design and cultural studies.

The Philosophy of Aesthetics

Aesthetics, simply defined as the study of art and beauty, has its roots in philosophy. In the treatises of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and others, the discussion of aesthetics includes investigations into the nature of beauty, the judgment of taste, definition of art and craft, and subjectivity. These discussions however, concern themselves much more with the world of art rather than that of everyday objects. And, as it is the application of aesthetics to common goods that is more relevant to industrial design, the discourse generated by cultural studies scholars and sociologists rather than philosophers, is more apposite to this essay. However, a brief overview can help clarify some of the main concerns of philosophical aesthetics, especially those that have evolved in the recent past.

Jerod Levinson (2003) lists three main areas of focus for philosophical aesthetics, simply labeled as art, aesthetic property and aesthetic experience. In more detail, "one focus involves a certain kind of *practice* or *activity* or *object*—the practice of art, or the activities of making and appreciating art, or those manifold

objects that are works of art. A second focus involves a certain kind of *property, feature, or aspect* of things—namely, one that is aesthetic, such as beauty or grace or dynamism. And a third focus involves a certain kind of *attitude, perception, or experience*—one that, once again, could be labeled *aesthetic* [emphases in original]” (2003, p. 3). The first, *art*, includes the following variations. Art is concerned with form for the sake of form and is capable of being art simply because it possesses significant form. It may also be perceived as a means by which an artist may express or communicate internal states of mind or emotional conditions. Art is also imitation of life or of the world outside of us, and lastly, it is an activity that aims to create objects of beauty that afford aesthetic experiences. The second, *aesthetic property* refers to visible qualities that art works might possess which allow them to be labeled as beautiful, ugly, unified, harmonious, calm, agitated, etc. These, in design may be referred to as characters. The third, *aesthetic experience*, as the name suggests, refers to a condition or state of mind, such as disentanglement from wants, total engagement with form, contemplation, etc.

As the profession of industrial design redefines the boundaries of its concerns and the nature of assignments typically undertaken by industrial design firms changes from mere gadgets to entire systems of interaction between people and services, products are being considered in terms of experiences. In relation to such a notion of products, it is important to note that the last definition of aesthetics as *aesthetic experience* is most suitable.

Aesthetics in Industrial Design

“The concept of form is so basic to design and so denuded in meaning in the formalist tradition that designers and design historians have not realized the full implication or importance of the concept. Design as we are most familiar with is focused on giving import to the form of things. At worst, this focus degenerates into pure design estheticism; a valid, stock criticism of the most banal versions of design history is that this focus deals only with the most superficial issues of form and style.” (Dilnot, 1989). It is clear from the statement above that, issues of form, beauty and style, though central to design activity have not received enough attention from scholars. Though histories of design have been written largely from stylistic perspectives, it is now recognized that those approaches provide only a partial understanding of the evolution of material culture. Therefore, a clearer agenda needs to be set for the study of the aesthetic in relation to design praxis, its education, and its theory. One of the crucial elements of this agenda will definitely need to be the evaluation of aesthetics, not merely from a design perspective, but from a socio-cultural perspective as well. When everyday objects are placed in society, they establish relations with people’s lives and routines, and if they have “significant forms” that is certain to affect the nature of the relationship. This relationship between material and cultural forms has a complex nature that can be understood better by examining the social rather than formal meanings of aesthetics.

Form, Language, Meaning

Within design language, the discussion of aesthetics and style often revolves heavily around the term “form.” Used as a means to describe the overall physical delineation and contours of objects, it is the key factor employed in the evaluation of aesthetic quality. Other supplemental elements of design that relate to form are surface characteristics such as material, color and texture, as well as details such as grooves, grills and buttons. Such descriptive critiques of objects are similar to the traditional methods employed in art criticism derived from the formalism of early 20th century. According to Raymond Williams, formalism’s “predominant emphasis was on the specific, intrinsic characteristics of a literary work, which required analysis ‘in its own terms’ before any other kind of discussion, and especially social or ideological analysis, was relevant or even possible” (1976, p. 114). It is clear that this form of analysis is largely internal because in its appreciation of the artwork, it relies entirely on the object per se, rather than the object in situation. Formalism in art is often treated as equivalent to ideas of ‘art for art’s sake,’ and has acquired a negative connotation as a system that relies entirely on qualities of the surface and disregards those of content. In industrial design literature, most analyses of form are based on the foundational elements of visual language (line, shape, contour, texture, etc.) rather than social and cultural issues.

In the pursuit of a unique and recognizable visual style, individual designers and corporations often develop their own signature design languages, as is visible in the products designed by, for example, Philippe Starck and Apple Computer. Of course, this is not unique to industrial design; all forms of cultural production, whether painting, architecture, film or literature, bear an imprint of the responsible mind and the environment within which the artifacts are created. The forms of objects can also be situated within the guiding principles of design movements such as Modernism, Art Deco, or Retrofuturism that provide designers with the appropriate and necessary visual tools to create a unique language. For example, Modernism specified its own palette of colors, materials and forms that designers abided by, lending most forms from the movement a family resemblance. Apart from the visual impact, what is also discussed in design is the type of character or personality that the object acquires, such as the cuteness of the new Volkswagen Beetle or the sophistication of the Sony Vaio computer. With the increasing use of ethnographic research tools in the early stages of design and emphasis on user-centered methods, these design languages are derived from the lifestyles of target users. For example, in designing shoes for skateboarders, Nike regularly recruits anthropologists to study and understand skaters so as to incorporate their physical, athletic, and stylistic needs into the design. Therefore, it is crucial that in critiquing these languages, social and cultural perspectives be considered along with formal and character/personality factors.

Of the three parameters, form, language and meaning, form is the most visual and corporeal, language is visual and composed of elements of form but not always legible, and meaning is most ephemeral and slippery of all. The meanings of objects are explored in all disciplines including philosophy, material culture studies, art history and design, but the meanings of aesthetics in relation to objects is an area seldom explored in academic terms. Some of the efforts directed towards understanding the meanings of objects were inspired by the scholarly work in semiotics and structuralism of linguists and philosophers such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), Charles Peirce (1963), Roland Barthes (1972), and Jean Baudrillard (1996). In the early 1980s, several designers used semiotics as a stepping-stone towards the development of product semantics. Defined as “the study of the symbolic qualities of man-made forms in the cognitive and social contexts of their use and the application of the knowledge gained to objects of industrial design,” (Krippendorff 1989) product semantics was analytical but also functioned as a tool for form generation in the process of product development. It relied on concepts of myth, metaphors, concept categorization and memory to explore how people understood the meaning of form. Its influence however was short lived; it was perceived as a style rather than a generative/interpretive tool, and it fell out of favor by the end of the eighties.

Design History

Born out of art history and a relatively recently established field of study, design history has been defined by John Walker as a “comparatively new intellectual discipline, the purpose of which it to explain design as a social and historical phenomenon” (1989, pp. 1). The adoption of this definition that emphasizes a contextual reading of the development of design and designed goods is visible in several recent texts, and marks a shift in the way history is written. See, for example, the work of historians such as Dennis Doordan (1995), Adrian Forty (1986), Penny Sparke (1987), Jonathan Woodham (1997) and journals such as the *Journal of Design History* from the Design History Society have made tremendous strides in framing design and its history in social contexts. However, a large number of texts in the past have tended to treat the history of designed objects using formalist strategies, often relaying aesthetic and technological information and neglecting the social or cultural. These books have also paid substantially more attention to the designers and the design process rather than the consumers and the meanings that arise in use; an approach that too is changing with more consumption-centric rather than production-centric texts. In the older discourses, therefore, aesthetics is treated as the primary framework through which objects are viewed and situated in a historical context. Movements based upon formal characteristics and chronology typically provided a structure for the texts, inadvertently or consciously suggesting that form is what matters most. Products get reduced to issues of style, while aesthetics decontextualized and severed from social grounding.

Design Education

The undergraduate educational programs in industrial design may be viewed, at the risk of oversimplification, as comprising of polarized opposites: studio and theory, making (construction) and breaking down (deconstruction), creative skills and analytical skills, individual and team work, as well as art and engineering. It is not unusual to find that skills often find precedence in programs of study and students graduate with little or no exposure to the critical dimensions of consumption, aesthetics, economics, or taste. It is important to note that universities are often pressed into teaching design praxis in a limited number of credit hours and this argument does not intend to lay blame on the educational system. Instead, the goal is to show why aesthetics is viewed purely in formalist terms and is rarely critiqued from, for example, a Marxist perspective. An inclusion of the discourse of style, taste, and form from other disciplines can greatly assist the development of a more holistic understanding of the terms and a conception of design as an activity with considerable ethical dimensions. Form should be taught not only in purely physical terms but also as an attribute of objects with significant social dimensions.

Cultural Dimensions of Aesthetics: The Politics of Beauty

Apart from philosophy, art and design, literature in cultural studies has also addressed the slippery concept of aesthetics, but little of it has seeped into design discourse. Texts that have emerged from two influential institutions, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and the Frankfurt School at the Institute of Social Research have had a significant impact on the evolution of cultural studies. The following areas of interest, germane to cultural studies provide useful contrapuntal voices to the existing meanings of aesthetics in design.

The Concerns of Cultural Studies

Several concerns that are central to the discourse in cultural studies may benefit design studies. Interpretive approaches in cultural studies draw heavily on Marxism, feminism and semiotics, thereby emphasizing the politics of power and issues of domination that exist in society. Cultural studies also locates the objects of its scrutiny in historical and social contexts of their production, distribution and consumption, thereby promoting the study of networks of everyday practices such as work, leisure, friendships, etc. Its aim is to assert the voices of large groups of people whose interests are either neglected or suppressed by hierarchies of power, and in doing so, it foregrounds inequalities implemented by gender, race and class. Cultural studies has been referred to as the voice of the 'other,' as the academic discipline that questions power relations in society, and as a method that foregrounds the importance of individual subjectivity over scientific objectivity in its study of culture.

Aesthetics in Cultural Studies

Histories of the field of cultural studies reveal that scholars who were involved with the two leading institutions were inspired and influenced initially by Marxist theories, and later by postmodernism. The defining and noteworthy contribution of the CCCS was the interest in working class culture that signaled a significant change. Culture was no more merely associated with 'high' forms of art and learning (philosophy, painting, classical music, literature), but included the 'low' forms of entertainment (sport, rock music, television, pulp fiction) that were central to the lives of the middle and lower classes. These scholars found Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as "the study of perfection" and of "the best that has been thought and known" (Middleton, 1999) to be narrow, elitist and undemocratic, and they sought to find a more inclusive definition, thereby setting themselves on a course that was antithetical to aesthetics. Having confessed "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language," British cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1976, p. 76) defines it in three parts as

"(i) the independent noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group... (and) (iii) an independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity"(Williams 1976, pp. 80).

The inclusion of “particular way of life” in defining culture is relevant for design, as it indicates that ordinary processes and routines that may include interaction with objects denote cultural practice. The interest exhibited by cultural studies scholars in knowing how people use popular entertainment, and their emphasis on ethnographic methods runs parallel to the concerns and research practices followed by designers. These affairs typically do not fall within the parameters defined by philosophical aesthetics, which, for the most part, continues its engagement with works of art rather than audience perceptions of works of art. Though design research that is undertaken in praxis engages deeply with users, the study of aesthetics continues to be self-contained and inwardly focused, in the tradition of philosophical aesthetics.

Valorization of Capital

In contrast to the usually positive value attached to product aesthetics in design, some accounts from cultural studies adopt a contrary view. Scholars from the Frankfurt school and the CCCS developed their theories and essays largely on Marxist traditions, and exhibited concerns about the utility of commodities, their exchange values, and the labor expended in their making. Marx viewed objects from two distinct perspectives, use-value and exchange-value, the former responsible for the object’s utility or function, and the latter for its ability to be traded for money or other commodities. Wolfgang Haug, in *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, suggests that form, or the body of the commodity is deceitful as it is a mere appearance of use-value that “promises more, much more than it can ever deliver” (1986, p.50). For Haug, commodity aesthetics represents a means by which capitalists seek to further the accumulation of wealth, without any regard to the genuine needs of people. Recent literature, especially that arising from material culture studies, however, refutes this argument by suggesting that people are not cultural dupes being manipulated by corporations, but they use processes of consumption as means of self-expression and development (Miller, 1994). It would be utterly inaccurate to suggest that design is merely an instrument that valorizes capital, but it would also be equally incorrect to assume that it is entirely driven by user needs. No easy argument can reconcile these diametrically opposed positions, but it is critical for designers to be aware of the role that design plays within the hierarchies of power in capitalist societies.

Commodity Desire: Seduction by Design

The employment of beauty towards the promotion of consumerism is explored fully and highly successfully in the profession of advertising. Product design too, by giving sensual surfaces and seductive colors to gadgets is accused of the same crime. For Haug, the aestheticized surface of the commodity becomes a second skin, much more beautiful than the first, and entirely detached from utility. “No one is safe any longer from its amorous glances, which the realization motive casts at the consumers with the detached yet technically perfect appearance of a highly promising use-value” (Haug, 1986, p.50). A discussion of the seductive nature of the object appears in the work of other cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin as well. For Baudrillard, our vulnerability to the seductive qualities of objects is misplaced desire, and that “the acquisition of objects is *without an object*” (Poster 1988, p.46). Walter Benjamin’s project, *The Arcades*, led him to study the relationships between people and things, especially from the eyes of the window shopper (*flâneur*), who would traverse the shopping malls of mid 1800s in Paris. “The commodity whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop-window containing beautiful and expensive things” (Benjamin 1973, p.55). It is known design that in a market saturated with homogenized products, one of the means of creating distinction and stimulating desire is through aesthetics, a fact that is well known to marketing experts as well. “The vitality of aesthetics in customers’ lives provides opportunities for organizations to appeal to customers through a variety of sensory experiences and thereby benefit both the customers and the organizations through customer satisfaction and loyalty” (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997, p.3). This seductive quality of products may also be employed by people to their benefit through the concept of style. Through an anthropological study of punks and bikers, Dick Hebdige (1991) has shown that people often reappropriate objects by modifying their appearances and functions to express social identity and belonging, subcultural resistance as well as defiant individualism.

What is contentious is not whether or not objects possess seductive qualities (it is clear that they do), but how deeply design is implicated in this process and if ethical issues of power and abuse are being deliberately neglected. Through the artful manipulation of form, is design creating a false sense of needs in people's minds in the service of powerful corporations or is it facilitating people's processes of development and identity? Is design securing the economic future of one group at the expense of another's? Is it possible to create a responsible aesthetics that is more socially rather than formally embedded? The Marxist and the consumerist positions represent extremes and design discourse should tackle these questions to provide a legitimate direction for design.

Class and Taste

While aesthetic quality might be seen as residing in objects, taste resides in people. "The idea of taste cannot now be separated from the idea of the consumer," suggests Raymond Williams (1976, p. 266). This observation brings into doubt the traditional and elitist definition of taste (synonymous to good taste) as one's ability to critically gauge the aesthetic worth of something. The act of consumption is also an act of exercising taste, and the sheer magnitude of this process makes it impossible to have a singular standard for taste. It is a fluid concept that possesses multiple meanings, all of which are dependent on context and situation.

Design has often considered the improvement of general taste as one of its tasks, and in the past, museums have aided it in this process. During the years when Modernism reigned supreme, good design was equated with a unique visual language that rejected ornamentation, and museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York took upon themselves the mission of educating people by showcasing specific designs. Whether or not people desired this aesthetic was not really questioned, and 'common' taste was 'otherized' as kitsch and unworthy. Design, therefore becomes the vehicle by means of which class difference is exhibited and exalted, and objects become symbols of that differentiation. "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed." (Bourdieu, 1984). In his study of the patterns of taste as gathered through interviews and questionnaires of French society in the 1960s, Bourdieu discovers that social distinction, exhibited through the objects one possesses and the aesthetic one ascribes to, is a significant element that defines people's social lives. A Rolex watch, for example, relies on (and perhaps maintains) a certain class structure in society, and it needs to do so in order to survive as an object.

The increased visibility of industrial design in museums such as Museum of Modern Art as well as stores such as Wal-Mart has definitely hastened its entry into everyday life, but does it also, through exclusive products, drive a deeper wedge between classes that were once described as highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow (Lynes, 1954)? The relationship between design and the maintenance of class structure needs to be examined closer.

Conclusion

It is clear that the positions adopted by designers and cultural studies scholars regarding the relationship between people, things and aesthetics, are often antagonistic. From a cultural studies point of view, some of the activities central to design praxis may be viewed as manipulative and driven by economic rather than humanistic concerns. Being a relatively new profession, design is still in the process of building knowledge to aid its self-understanding, and discussions such as these that foreground the social, political and economic concerns are significant and need to be included within the boundaries of its study. Within design studies, aesthetics continues to be one of the least examined areas that deserves serious attention, and the research methods and interpretive techniques used by cultural studies can serve as appropriate models. This article only offers a quick overview of how cultural studies research may inform a specific aspect of design, namely aesthetics. It also suggests that formalist evaluations of aesthetics and meaning, though valuable, are incomplete and need to be supplemented by other interpretive strategies that include social and cultural concerns. Other areas that also need exploration are gender,

race and ethnicity, economics, and policy. Engagement with the discourses outside the discipline can only enrich the discourse within, providing us with better tools for understanding the extent of the impact design has on the everyday lives of people.

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