

NULLA ETHICA SINE ESTHETICA: SHOULD AESTHETICISM STILL BE STIGMATIZED?

A CALL TO RESCUE THE ANCIENT “UTOPIA OF BEAUTY”, TOGETHER WITH AN INVITATION TO MOVE BEYOND AESTHETIC ELITISM

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Abstract / Introduction

ThRAD's editors have set a challenge to write about “Utopia”, and with it utopian ways of thinking about reality. It makes little difference whether “Utopia” refers to an old book put in its historical context, or an everlasting concept that is still-relevant. The topic is grounded in a debate concerning elitism and the elitist nature of the majority of theoretical approaches within the field of the Humanities. Meanwhile, in Alessandro Mendini’s recent visit to Barcelona, he referred to the “*utopia della bellezza*”, illuminating his inspiring point of view. To accept the *ThRAD* challenge it seemed necessary to review the aesthetic dimension of everyday life, the relation of beauty to ethics within design and the design factor as well. *Les jeux sont faits!*

This is the background of this article. Reviewing the history of design, this text analyses ideas and approaches to beauty as brought to the fore over various periods, proposing a dialogue between the understanding of ordinary life as proposed by certain philosophers, and, on the other hand, what has been said by designers themselves. The main aim of this essay is to capture the utopian elements embedded in aesthetic pleasures and delights even on their more elementary levels, here referring to the immediateness of the senses and sensual perception. Our inquiry also seeks to understand how aestheticism could become a sort of offense to be argued against, rather than something to be praised. It also seeks out the historical roots for the charge of elitism launched so often against aesthetic facts and aestheticist enactments. In this domain, the utopia of design is made suspect, as is the utopia of beauty. Hence, one underlying aim of this article is to reconsider the role played by the design industry in shaping the contemporary world. Finally, the text further serves as a call to enjoy and give cultural value to everyday life on the basis of its cultural depth and permanence, though being all the while humble and quite often simple. Thus, design practice also becomes a hopeful practice, culturally relevant while remaining ordinary all the same.

(Please accept my apologies for submitting a text so formally elitist; such is the option taken. I am grateful to the editors for inviting me to take part in this broader conversation while sharing my preoccupations, fears, concerns and thoughts with colleagues and friends).

STARTING POINT: NEW CHALLENGES IN PRESENT-DAY AESTHETIC THINKING

Reading several recent calls for papers — including this *ThRAD* issue devoted to “Utopia” — a certain dismissive ambience against aesthetics quickly emerges as the general tone. The aesthetic dimension gets pushed into the background of design understanding. I disagree with approaches such as these; indeed, I feel rather uncomfortable and disappointed with them. Furthermore, due to the influence of present-day philosophy and cultural criticism, these sorts of documents state and pick up on the issue of the aestheticization of capitalism and of everyday life, taking such phenomena for granted. Though being a widely accepted approach in understanding the twenty-first century paradigm (or is it rather an *episteme*



Figure 2 - Drawings and lay-outs designed by Spanish Graphic Designer Josep Pla-Narbona for Christmas cards in the early seventies. Clients: JoRiGu and Cosmos companies, the first one producing socks, and the second one High Fidelity devices. Pictures provided by its author, private archive.



Figure 1 - Icons of Catalan design used as furniture in a Rural Hotel in the Spanish countryside arranged quite recently in Monroyo, in the Matarraña county in north Valencian Country. You can see two BKF chairs (1948), a redesign updating the Cesta lamp by Miguel Milà (originally 1962) and the fireplace by Tusquets-Clotet (1977?).

or *esprit du temps*?), this is its cultural and economic background. The peculiarities of the new historical context, along with the issue of the aestheticization of the economy and the world itself, are still being used to look for blame for these circumstances, while aesthetics explains the essential banality of the current world. Of course design is further blamed (even when putting on its finest face) for behaving like an aestheticization procedure along the way. Still, how much wisdom is there in that old, worn-out formula of “what is ugly does not sell”, a phrase popularized in Spanish by the translators of a book by Raymond Loewy¹.

In contrast, another way of questioning the cultural action of design (especially amongst design historians in the Anglo-Saxon tradition) may be derived from the accusation of social and cultural elitism, as if this were something implicit in all forms of behaviour, enjoyment and judgement related to aesthetics. In this sense, if on the one hand aesthetics is understood as a synonym of banality, frivolity and superficiality, on the other hand, when dealing with those aesthetic manifestations that are culturally relevant, it then corresponds to the excess of social or cultural content typical of the Fine Arts (where only high culture seems to be of value), becoming the reason for rejecting and criticizing aesthetic phenomenon. From one extreme to the other it is hard to see the aesthetic dimension in design as something worth being concerned about.

However, as understood in the terms of design and design culture, the issue of aestheticization should not necessarily be demonized. On the contrary: it could also be seen as a consequence of an accurate ethical approach to designers making things. At the least, the theory of the aestheticization of mature, financial capitalism itself raises many doubts for scholars and others involved in design practice, design philosophy and design history. To offer up a few examples of the questions involved: why is aestheticization still a way of carrying out criticism of a dismissive nature for so many thinkers and philosophers reflecting on our times? Why are the more negative and pejorative meanings of aesthetics, aestheticism and aestheticist attitudes so often the ones chosen? Why have dismissive, despising and disdainful meanings been so easily and widely accepted amongst design scholars and people working within design culture? Finally, we might ask — and this is perhaps the more relevant question now — even if focusing only on the negative effects of aestheticization performances, what then is left of the old utopia of design and its self-legitimizing discourse of being a culturally relevant aesthetic practice?

Speaking in a more positive tone, design can just as well be seen as a complex discipline with a rich and varied culture of its own, a difficult technique involving making things and a highly professionalised activity carried out the world over since modernization processes began propagating internationally. With this, then, a set of new questions tends to arise: if this is the case, how can design still be a culturally relevant human practice while dedicating so much time to refining interfaces and improving the appearance of screens? Is it still true that professional design is an aesthetic practice, and, if so, can it be conceptualised and analyzed as such? Being aesthetically competent, can a designer's skill still be helpful in designing new technological realities, even when they are hyper, augmented or virtual?

The list of questions could go on even further, so it is best to stop here and see what can be made of what we have. As they are still being posed, questions such as these can also be highly inspiring, opening up projects to think about and conduct further research on. This is what this article seeks to do, all the while accepting the challenge of writing about utopias and, hopefully, utopian ways of thinking. Its goal is to think about the issue of aestheticization by focussing on the concerns of design. A suspicion underlies the whole argument: philosophical aesthetics is needed as an approach that is specific and peculiar to design, focussing on the many trivial, ordinary and common



Figure 3 - Mendini's installation in an exhibition held at the Triennale di Milano, winter 2016. Picture taken by the author.

aesthetic experiences filling the everyday world, ordinary existence as still found on either side of the screen. This can only be done by accepting the elitist perils built into the question of beauty as one of the most elementary sensual pleasures. These issues link directly to what could be another sort of utopia, utopian thought as expressed in beauty, aesthetics and the aesthetic dimension of life.

REMINISCENCE: THE “UTOPIA DELLA BELLEZA”, AN ANCIENT IDEAL

*“... perché dietro a tutti i designers,
nel più profondo del suo cuore,
c'è sempre l'utopia della bellezza.”²*

Alessandro Mendini's words, spoken recently in prose in Barcelona, are clear, simple and sincere. Shortly before he spoke them, I found a text by Ettore Sottsass in which he also referred to beauty as the sole possible hope, still active and present, the key to understanding the nature of design³. I then remembered the words of the critic Rick Poyner, spoken in a context such as his, where good design tends to be associated with “good business”, in which he called for again taking up the search for beauty as something intrinsic to design. Quoting Michael Beirut, he stated:

“Approaching heresy at a time when aesthetic quality is the last thing we are supposed to consider, Beirut goes so far as to modestly propose that ‘just making something look nicer’ or ‘replacing something ugly with something not so ugly’ is an admirable goal for designers.”⁴

Beauty, therefore, or rather the aesthetic dimension of material things, is a fundamental and quite enduring question, despite the many efforts made by aesthetic theories and the philosophy of Fine Arts since the time of Romanticism to cast doubt on it and dismiss it as an irrelevant and obsolete category. For my part, I have always thought of design as a separate case among the aesthetic practices typical of modernity and the theoretical reflections concerning them. What is more, as I see it, the need for design arose for the first time in history out of a certain nostalgia for beauty, for that old classical beauty even, which was gradually vanishing from the daily landscape. As always, William Morris comes to our aid by asking the key question. In one of his first talks, he pondered something along these lines: Why is it that over the course of more than 2000 years, humanity's actions in creating an artificial environment in which to live had always improved the natural landscape whereas, starting in the nineteenth century, all human intervention spoiled it and made it uglier? The blame, as is well known, was industry, at least in terms of the widespread way industry has been implemented, governed by economic interests and a bottom line focused solely on financial profit. More than a century and a half after Morris, the world has become even uglier and, despite being more comfortable, nature has been exhausted to such an extent that the very planet is on the verge of collapse.



Figure 4, 5 - Views of Barcelona's 20th Century suburbs: 1) View of a neighbourhood combining modern popular buildings from 1970s built in the valley and the hill combined with old houses of the ancient village built at the turn of the 20th century. The picture reflects the process of substitution and rebuilding due to evolving times and speculation done avoiding gentrification. Recently the ancient village area has been a paradise for squatters and street artists learning their job. 2) Blocks of flats built in early 1970s as cheap houses for the working class during a strong migration wave. Its aesthetic look expresses and signifies clearly a low-cost mentality both materially and culturally (pictures by the author).

Definitively, nostalgia for beauty; nostalgia for that beauty symptomatic of the cultural health of the inhabitants of a natural setting, a sign of the refinement reached simultaneously in all human faculties: sensual, sensorial, sentimental and intellectual. A beauty, in short, whose disappearance involves the loss of both the sensory attractiveness of the natural world and the cultural significance of the setting in which people live. When this occurs, settings become inhospitable, unpleasant, even aggressive to all the senses, as is the case of so many of the outskirts of large, albeit highly civilized cities. An important paradox is present here that human culture and the humanities must urgently address: at present, aesthetics no longer corresponds to the degree of civility achieved; it is no longer an indicator of personal refinement or of the cultivation of human faculties. It is no wonder, therefore, that design arose as a response to the nostalgia for beauty, claiming for itself the task of building a more beautiful world, an artificial setting in which the play of aesthetic appearances and symbolic images were once again lovely, which could sustain even lengthy observation, that could be given long, calm, serene contemplation. This may seem like an unreachable utopia, and yet a humble dimension exists in beauty, something very modest and even common. It is what the pleasantness and prettiness of the everyday cultivates and refines, that prosaic and trivial pretty form that surrounds us daily, resisting the arrogance of the sublime so typical of that which aims to be transcendent, whatever the medium of expression happens to be.



Figure 6 - Touristic signs set on the Mediterranean Axe motorway, area of Valencia, in Spain. Designed and drawn by Paco Bascuñán, were implemented by Autonomous Government of the region during 1980s.



Figure 7 - Ornaments to celebrate: Christmas in Barcelona lighted streets. Designed by Emiliana Studio in 2014, it writes all the noises usually listened during Christmas at home, most common onomatopoeias.

Having said this, two things can be calmly affirmed. First, that design is an aesthetic practice in every right: made by hand or by machine, conceived for many or for few, design always works searching for the beauty of its creations — exactly as Mendini stated⁵. This is the ultimate sense of the design factor present in everyday things. Second, in searching for everyday beauty and, for many people, the ordinary, design was able to keep itself outside the realm of the Fine Arts and its aesthetic theory. Indeed, the Fine Arts also consolidated themselves as aesthetic practices, albeit increasingly linked to the sublime and the extraordinary⁶.

Let us now look at the matter historically to keep the analysis from seeming too theoretical. The subject of beauty was at the centre of the philosophical debate on aesthetics in the eighteenth century. The sense of taste and people's capacity for aesthetic enjoyment began to be discussed just as the bourgeoisie appeared on the cultural scene. As a Neoclassical period in style and form, the Rococo extravagances of the aristocracy were exaggerations of some strongly developed and ostentatious decorative arts, a luxury that was not always well-understood. They were never, however, considered to be expressions of bad taste, nor examples of intentional ugliness. On the

contrary, caprices and extravagances were seen as highly interesting manifestations valued for their capacity to innovate, experiment and push styles to evolve. Another reflection by Sottsass is appropriate here. Speaking of craftsmanship as a historical concept, and from the perspective of class, the designer very astutely stated:

“The rich have always handsomely rewarded those who have designed and built goods, objects and instruments to configure their image as the powerful, to create a beautiful image around them, to define, recognize, reencounter, present and maintain themselves in the condition of being the rich. The rich have always paid special attention to the creation, development and maintenance of the provisional or stable signs by which they, the rich, agree to be described and portrayed and have always even painstakingly supervised the creation and maintenance of a general idea of the concept of “quality” or, if you will, of the concept of the aesthetic or the beautiful...”⁷

Herein lies the basis for the accusation of elitism applied to the aesthetic so often brandished over the past century. The question of bad taste is thus entirely a nineteenth century matter. It's not for nothing that the first words caricaturizing the tastes and manners of the new rich appeared in that century in all languages: the adjective *cursi*⁸ emerged in Spain in about 1830; at that time in Germany, the term *Biedermaier*, a caricaturized ridiculous person, was used to describe the bourgeois style of decoration. With bad taste, the elitist significance of everyday aesthetics came into being. In that period, the debates in Europe on the regeneration of the industrial arts often proposed restoring laws of good taste. The articles in the *Journal of Design and Manufactures* (London, 1948-1852) were the first to call for reinstating such laws, and did so in the most direct way; other countries followed suit⁹. In Barcelona, the famous album by Luis Rigalt was published in 1856 as pedagogical material to orient craftsmen and workers of all types about how to plan better and more attractive models in the productive arts. These are indications of the nineteenth century concern for preserving or improving the aesthetic quality of useful things, a factor increasingly recognized as valuable for the commercialization, consumption and use of manufactured goods.

Finally, the *ism* of modernity, Modernism, which governed cultural activity throughout the “short 20th century”¹⁰, would strive to ensure that the task of design remained focused on the search for beauty, although it was now a very modified beauty and one that had to be as culturally relevant as, and in the form of the avant-garde visual arts. The theoretical challenge continued to be how to articulate the nature of that new cultural relevance special to design. Let us examine this in greater detail.



Figure 8, 9, 10 - A humble Art Nouveau detail: iron work for a bell next to the door house. La Garriga, a village near to Barcelona used once to stay in summer time. Modernist classicism everlasting product not necessarily classed as a luxury good anymore, the Chanel 5 bottle and label. Exposed recently at the Triennale di Milano (2016). André Ricard first design of a bottle for an Eau de Cologne addressed to exportation and the mass market, the Agua Lavanda Puig, 1963. Puig is nowadays a transnational company in the area of perfumes and colognes.

DESIGN AS IDEAL: SOMETHING MORE THAN DEMOCRATIZING GOOD TASTE

... diferentes belezas:

“Ó beleza futurista das mercadorias...

A beleza numérica...

A nova sensibilidade tipográfica...

A beleza alfabética pura”¹¹.

In the early twentieth century, the utopia of design was transnational in nature, given that it was linked to the idea of modernization according to the European model. In the view of modern design, just as with human rights, people were all equal and, therefore, it was only logical that they should desire similar things. In national terms, that ideal translated into a democratizing principle, given that industry's positive aspects made less expensive, final products possible thanks to assembly line production, thereby favouring access to everyday goods, tools and adornments for an increasingly larger segment of the population. This is also the underlying philosophy of mass production. One of the most obvious and striking consequences of this process has been, first, to favour consumption, and then to encourage consumerism as a way to guarantee the continuation of the system; by comparing the periods of consumption before and after the war (the Spanish Civil War and WWII), these two stages are perfectly recognizable. Another consequence has been to enormously improve the quality of life of most people in many countries. In view of the fact that we have now returned to living in a nostalgic period — particularly in ecological terms — it is appropriate to recall the words of Sottsass highlighting the distinguishing features of the two types of craftsmanship that have existed throughout the entire history of humanity and — he would add — “I believe around the world” [*op. cit.*, 1977]: while the craftsmanship of the Ancien Regime (or, in other words, the craftsmanship produced in Europe from the period of the Renaissance up to the industrial revolution) was the work of the best craftsmen of the time produced for the luxury market and aristocratic ostentation, the other craftsmanship, the system of production by which the common people produced their work tools, was of a very different nature:

“For all those people who need tools to work, rather than to live with, craft offers a game that has always been — and still is — brief, short. It has always been acquiescent, conforming, melancholy, pathetic and sometimes poignant.”¹²

In such a context, the utopian ideal implicit in the first conceptualizations of design consisted of its knowing how to make use of the possibilities offered by industry to increase production, improve products and lower prices. It thus preached hope in a world that may not have been improved ethically, but was at least more practical and comfortable; in terms of domestic work — and in the long run, similarly in factories at the machines — it was even a bit more just. The action of design also forms part of the much-vaunted welfare state, which is now undergoing a profound revision and transformation. That utopian, ethical ideal can be summed up as the attainment of greater welfare for more people both inside and out of the given country, or of the area of influence of the place where a product is designed and manufactured. One might object that it is a democratic ideal of an economic or political type because it improves living conditions for a majority of people, but it also contains an equally democratizing cultural utopia. Indeed, conceived and proposed as a serious and sincere aesthetic practice, the design factor appears as one more aspect of everyday objects, which are aimed at and reached everyone (as is the case with household appliances, personal computers or pharmaceutical leaflets) and by means of which the culture of a specific civilization manifests itself, is built and projects itself toward the future. Design thus assumes an attractive social mission when it is legitimized as a socially necessary and useful activity for the collective.

Figure 11 - Examples of products made industrially for the public space to be used by everybody. Right: The Neo-romantic banc designed by Miguel Milà to furniture streets and public gardens. This one is placed in front of the reconstructed Mies Van der Rohe's Pavillion for the Barcelona expo of 1929). Designed in 1995, produced by Santa & Cole.



Figure 12, 13 - More Urban furniture and mobility services. Left, a bus station in a Barcelona street with all the signs concerning the bus reform. Designed by architects Elias Torres, J.A. Martínez Lapeña and José Luis Canosa in 1980s, just before the Olympic games of 1992 when its implementation was completed.

Right: An image of the new buses and a big stop conceived as a tramway onw belonging to the Transmilenio new public network of busses pushed by the Town Council in Bogotá, Colombia. The new system of mobility is in process of being accepted by the population.

This democratizing ideal was based on the search for a formal language that could be universal, typical of modernity and applied to goods in a constantly expanding market, which, by the end of the twentieth century, had become fully global. As Tevfik Balcioglu has repeatedly stated from Turkey¹³, faced with a localized and localist craftsmanship, characterized by its traditional nature, design in its origin meant modernity and universality, functioning as a synonym and expression of cosmopolitanism as an ideal at various levels: as an ethical and political value or, also, as a way of behaving and acting, and even as an economic demand — it should be recalled that while in the twentieth century cosmopolitan identity was based on the universality of human rights, in the twenty-first century its updating depends on the planet's sustainability and the need to manage the efficient use of nature as both a global and collective problem¹⁴. Today, cosmopolitanism implies a way of thinking by means of which the issues concerning humanity as a whole can be faced.

Returning to the founding epoch of design, during the long period termed the Modern Movement in its various

stages, the democratizing ideal of a cultural type was articulated through the cosmopolitan ideal, which in turn expressed the modernization processes underway in a specific place. There is no question that the three previously mentioned phenomena are very strongly related: modernization, cosmopolitanism and design all form part of respective semantic fields. Thus, the universal language of design becomes the procedure to adopt when aiming at the sector of the international market where the uses, conducts, behaviour and attitudes of a cosmopolitan type predominate, indicating the degree of modernization achieved. Modernization can be either economic — i.e., relative to the means of production used and the degree of technological development — or cultural, in so much as it depends on the aesthetic tendencies and the type of creative manifestations valued in relation to what occurs in other parts of the world. Historically, the cultural relevance of design has depended on the place it occupies in this system of interrelations and the role it plays in them. In practice, the options are many and varied, as many as the ways of being, tastes and ideologies of active designers, as well as of the other various actors who participate in the design process. Among all the possible options, which are many and diverse, there will always be differences in terms of the level of the quality and interest achieved by the solutions arrived at. The cultural relevance of so very many designs created in recent history is based on this. It is the implicit promise in the concern for the beauty of things, in cultivating the aesthetic dimension of the everyday environment: in effect, the design factor.

With similar reasoning, many authors have seen in culturally interesting design the capacity to play a pedagogical role in society; in fact, this was one of the legitimizing arguments of design brandished by critics and analysts in the 1950s and 1960s, based on the Bauhaus model. Able to grasp the most cryptic palpable and expressive advances of the avant-garde visual arts, design could act as a mediator between highly selective art and the general public. It popularized the most refined artistic discoveries through creations installed in the everyday landscape conceived to communicate directly to people. A. M. Cassandre, Josep Renau and other poster artists made Cubism popular, as F. Depero did with Futurism and K. Schwitters with DADA. For its part, surrealism became a technique of visual enunciation used by almost all visual artists after the war; and Rand, like the concrete painters Bruno Munari, M. Bill and Tomás Maldonado, closely followed the *informalist* path Félix Beltrán and Pepe Cruz Novillo applied in Op Art. And it worked. Posters, control panels and a range of interfaces were easily comprehensible to the general public, as were the systems of signs set up on roads and in metros. Seen thus, it seemed logical that design would end up becoming the popular art of industrial society, that it would articulate the creative expression of the people in that period dominated by cultural industries of all types. Design could mediate between various levels of culture, introducing examples of high culture into mass culture: it could have formed a bridge between the people, everyday life, and that art world, for the moment extraordinary and totally closed unto itself¹⁵. This is what the aesthetic utopia of design consisted of. It was based on the certainty that it made sense to produce aesthetically interesting things to favour the implantation of high culture in everyday life, or in other words, in mass and popular culture. This is why many designers adopted an overly pedagogic or somewhat paternalist attitude when referring to the majority of the users for whom they worked¹⁶.

A very interesting social mission for design, but one not exempt from criticism. It is an ideal that still considers cultural processes from above, looking downward, thereby reinforcing the elitist conception of art in the world of design and transforming it into something extraordinary. Furthermore, as the Barcelona writer and critic Joan Perucho made clear in the 1960s when seeking to understand the graphic arts as an aesthetic practice, this type of designer also participates in the cultured nature of the art he or she popularizes, given that, in fact, as occurred with the Bauhaus, the designer also generates avant-garde graphic and formal proposals regardless of how easily comprehensible he or she manages to make them. This was the condition required to understand the value of art and popularize it

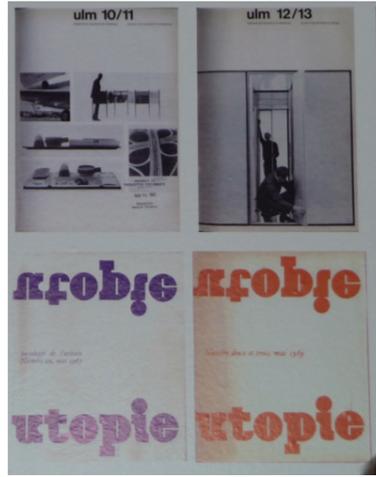


Figure 14, 15 - Two examples of Commercial and Cultural Graphic Designs of nineteen fifties that apply the avant-garde visual language to communicate through graphics: Left, advertising page of a magazine; right: covers of journals devoted to architecture and design exposed in Bogotá, Universidad Jorge Tadeo, summer 2013. To include a reference to HfG Ulm in this paper was forced; then, given the issue of that publication issue, the second one was too strong a temptation, authors unknown (CRAI UB Fons Artigas collection; a picture by the author on the spot).

without betraying it, even while transforming it into commercial art. Thornstein Veblen had already warned of the high culture vision connected to the aristocratizing defence of craftsmanship made by Ruskin and Morris in their day: it is a matter of the classicism implicit in the entire vision of culture structured by levels of complexity of forms, among which the showy and the spectacular were not precisely the most valuable¹⁷. A second criticism also exists of that social projection of design: it does not manage to free itself from that conception of design according to which it is a lesser art, a decorative art, even though related to industry. What is clear is that a form of utopia for design was there. The possibility had arisen, and with it the legitimacy of aiming to make culturally significant things beginning from below and in relation to people, to the “real” world of Papanek, with its common, ordinary, simple and popular tastes, even humble ones, although rarely were they austere. This was then another challenge, difficult to carry out in either theory or practice.

At any rate, the challenge became entirely moot after the Frankfurt School’s condemnation of cultural industries, including design, for the fact of being industries. For these philosophers, the industrial world admitted no possibility whatsoever for an authentic and culturally interesting popular culture. The industrialized creation of mass culture obstructed any and all forms of popular manifestation because all cultural performance was created as merchandise. Aesthetic concepts and appearance were the result of a dressing up operation that neither contributed nor revealed anything in cultural terms and, therefore, offered no possibility of living, genuine aesthetic experiences.



Figure 16 - Exhibition of posters displaying some appeared in the street during the years 2014 to 2016. It shows a selection of Marc Martí’s Collection of Posters, held at the Design Museum of Barcelona, spring 2016. The title says: “in the side behind you can see posters not exhibited in the street”. It is thus proposing a confrontation between two sort of posters, the commercial and the ideological ones.

Everything was entertainment and pleasing decoration. To aestheticize now appeared as a deceptive practice, a procedure of trivialization that turned everything into an entertaining spectacle. However, as Adorno also warned, the strict, austere and classically serene functionalism of the Modern Movement did not seem to be a humanly assumable option for the population as a whole. What, then, of the utopian remained for design in the realm of aesthetics?

In terms of literature, Hans R. Jauss opened the door to people's experience by demonstrating that the reception of the work participates in the work itself, giving it meaning (*Lector in fabula*, as Umberto Eco would say). In the field of sociology, Michel de Certeau recognized that the consumer is an active actor. He showed that consuming and using goods is not as automatic and unconscious an act as previously thought, but one which instead forms part of the non-verbal communication people use to move in society à l'aise, comfortably, at ease. The designer Victor Papanek had also realized all this. What he called the real world — much more real for him than the world of designers — not only had not assumed the utopias of design and its model of culture (definitively, its aesthetic parameters) but had in fact fully rejected them, as if “they didn't go with it”. Curiously, this occurred coinciding with Pop Art, an artistic movement that eliminated almost all levels of cultural complexity — a case of surrealism as a form of graphic enunciation — and a graphic movement that managed to give value to all worthwhile forms of popular culture, at least aesthetically and sentimentally speaking; the best icons of mass culture.

That the real world, or in other words, the majority of the population, does not follow the dictates of high culture has been a constant for at least the past three centuries: it has been the case since most people have been able to choose between diversified aesthetic proposals, some created by the people themselves, others made with them in mind. The Enlightenment discovery of the variety of tastes was the first announcement of that phenomenon by which social groups differentiate themselves and express their dis-equality through their aesthetic preferences. Thus, as the aesthetic was intellectualized, separating itself from craftsmanship, technical virtuosity and its system of values, it came, at first, to mark differences between two large social classes. On one side were those who had the time and money to educate their taste and become competent in aesthetic matters, thereby becoming able to consume artworks and quality products; on the other side were those who, with neither time nor money, remained in the commonness of ordinary taste, which required no higher education or training. Thus arose the elitist component of the aesthetic, and of that which socially clearly distinguished it: good taste. With time, and through the influence of art history as a framework of study, that implicit elitism in the aesthetic was transferred to design and to any definition of good design in which the term denotes a historical style based on a very refined and ascetic abstract classicism, such as that which characterized the Modern Movement the world over.

THE GLOBAL REACH OF THE PROFOUND CHANGES TAKING PLACE IN THE 1980s

The 1980s were a time of profound historical, social and cultural change. Philosophers and historians even speak of a change of historical era. Modernity was left behind with all of its distinctive features: the masses, industry as the sole means of production; so too were the social structures related to it, such as the division of society into two large social classes. In the field of design, the changes were many and highly significant. Observing them from Mexico with a global perspective, Oscar Salinas recently noted the creative character of those years¹⁸.

In his opinion, design evolved following the development of some technologies that were new at the time: personal computers, postscript technology, the internet, 3D printing, along with the first serious warnings of climate change. As a consequence, design has had to profoundly rethink itself over the past four decades and has generated an endless array of new specialities, creating areas in which the competencies of a designer are decisive (Design for All, Service Design, Design and Sustainability, Open Design, Social Design...). For this, however, what is most important is that the creativity of those years was “equally original everywhere”, and he stated this referring now to the entire world. Salinas continues by highlighting the new logic imposed by the global perspective: second and third tier countries, like so many freelance designers and small companies everywhere, gained access to the most cutting edge technology without having to spend too much. Consumers and the general public around the world also changed, especially in geopolitically second and third tier countries (the BRIC ones, and Mexico perhaps) as the living standards and purchasing power of their inhabitants rose, living conditions improved and accessible information increased throughout the world. This has generalized “the aspiration to live in a new culture of global consumption”¹⁹. For me, this is what best defines globalization from the perspective of ordinary people in the 21st century. A universalist framework is thus created for design and its language.

The decade had a great many other effects on the world of design. These include what are now understood to be post-modern features, many of which consist of formal and methodological proposals defined by their opposition



Figure 17 - An example of public space although placed in an interior, with furniture specially designed for the area. It is the Bar and Lobby of the Museum of Design Barcelona, inaugurated in 2015. Kylim fabric for the seat designed and produced by Nani Marquina. There are other design icons easy to recognize, perfectly integrated in the ensemble without drawing a special attention on it-selves.

to the modern legacy. Regarding what concerns us here, that is, aesthetic utopia and overcoming elitist discourse, it was during these the years that high culture focused on all that was popular and the finest realizations of mass culture, even those manufactured by industry, thereby freeing industrial products from the guilty conscience Theodor W. Adorno had branded them with, regardless of how well such a product may have been designed. To this end, recourse was made to some of the older subjects so typical of the traditional aesthetics applied to material culture and the decorative arts that modern design, as a high culture movement, had entirely ignored. The value of decoration was recognized, and that old aesthetic concept of the decorative function used a century earlier by Morris to explain the quality and value of his wallpapers and printed chintz was updated. The decorative once again became an aesthetic reference and a creative object of the first order, and ornament was thereby re-valued and assumed its capacity to fulfil structural functions, resolving them in a very lovely way — just as Art Nouveau would do in all its manifestations. At the same time, craftsmanship appeared in a different light: in creating objects, manual work offered a personalized option in the face of the depersonalized standardization typical of industry. It must be said, however, that such work was still weighed down with an excess of tradition, in contrast to certain widespread industrial products that populated the childhood-related sentimental imagination.

History and its weight on the present also changed its significance during these years and, in the long run, the essential historicism of the modern era (the eighteenth to the twentieth century) was totally surpassed in form and content by the new technological universe and its perennial vogue. This, at least, is what happened in old Europe. History ceased to be a source of knowledge and became a repertoire of forms in which to seek inspiration for new trends (the method of constant revival); eclecticism again became a creative method and symbol of sensible intelligence. Finally, the small series was progressively reevaluated until becoming almost a unique piece, allowing for customization and false luxury. Manufacturing small series, as with craftsmanship techniques, provides greater productive dynamism, capacity for experimentation with forms and techniques and integration of products, services and ITC. And so Mendini reappeared on the scene: in the mid-1980s he stated that users, designers and critics, people in general, all of us, were a bunch of “sentimental robots” living in hope of the socio-cultural and historical revolution that the ITC had announced for the whole world simultaneously²⁰.

From the point of view of aesthetics, post-modernity had another interesting peculiarity: social and cultural differences were no longer understood according to differences in rank or social class. Lipovetsky demonstrated how aesthetic competency became professionalized over the course of the twentieth century and, therefore, that aesthetic models, fashions and trends were spread by channels that had nothing now to do with the game of ostentation and mutual recognition staged between members of a well-established social class. This is the schema of social distinction that Bourdieu analyzed in his day from the perspective of a sociology of social classes²¹, demonstrating what coexistence was like during that time between the two main social classes in times of peace: one, always the same, proposed itself to itself as a model while at the same time innovating to differentiate itself from the other class; this other class, meanwhile, attempted to follow the first and catch up but always did so a bit later, a bit too late, to tell the truth. Even today, this is the descriptive schema of the elitist discourse applied to aesthetic sense and behaviours, and its sociological foundation. Well into post-modernity, in contrast, the aesthetic dimension of life, whether artistic or everyday, ordinary or extraordinary, was no longer the expression of a social class that knew itself to be dominant but rather, at most, of a tribe that wanted to make itself known and socially identify itself as a specific social group. Its aesthetic proposal, seen as a trend and not as a fashion, played and measured itself on the playing field with many others in conditions of equality — according to an urban legend, a recent men's fashion adopted by people of all social classes was inspired by prison clothing. Clearly, the broadcasting centre of far-reaching aesthetic proposals and trends had been displaced in a very significant way in respect to the immediate past, prior to Pop Art and the hippy fashions of the 1960s. The significance of clothing, hairstyle, body care and personal image also changed. More than fashion, the pertinent functions had changed and, with them, the general sensibility of individuals and their tribes, or groups of collective recognition. The direction in which trends circulated was also reversed: since Punk, the people of the poorest outlying and inner city urban areas of the richest countries have set the trend.

One phenomenon goes quite far in explaining this change of attitude. Beginning in the 1980s, even in Europe and Anglo-Saxon America, almost the entire planet was New Rich. What is more, by leaving behind the specific native artisan form of production of each culture and adopting industrial and modernizing methods, the situation at the starting point was equal for everyone: that of the rookie, parvenu, upstart — definitively, that of the *nouveau riche*. As a result, cultural production and the launching of aesthetic referents were broadened as well as diversified.

On the other hand, the real *nouveau riche* — that is, those who were rich like oil barons, drug and arms traffickers, the bosses of the black markets of formerly communist countries, the large-scale manufacturers of

Southeast Asia and financial speculators — generated an original art of their own whose creation did not depend on influences imported from the habitual cultural centres. This modern style, furthermore, had a great capacity to impose itself abroad: in recent years Japan has been the major exporter of “cool” culture, with its manga drawings, its unconscious “Lolitas”, its videogames, consoles and other electronic games. This art of the *nouveau riche*, certain of itself and of its originality, joined another form of new art, the young art emerging from the urban peripheries of industrialized countries — as mentioned above, the founding case is the Punk of the English urban peripheries; later came Street Art, which is stylistically so similar everywhere in the world. For their part, cultural and creative industries continued launching products, distributing them as global merchandise. They are identifiable by the “best-seller” style, a very characteristic graphic art used for the cover of this type of book the world over. Thanks to the special effects made available to the general public by computers, this style has slowly but surely begun occupying the global graphic environment at all levels of cultural production, regardless of whether the production aims to position itself as popular or high culture. It would seem that the cultural weight of high culture would thus be lightened by presenting itself as something the general public could digest, thus overcoming elitism, but this is not the case.

Reasoning further, one can even state that as a consequence of post-modern evolution, it is no longer as easy to distinguish the three, classic sociological levels — mass or popular culture, mass or media culture, and high or specialized culture — in current cultural production. Level no longer translates into a criterion of quality as it turns into genres differentiated in terms of tone and forms. Thus, defining aesthetic variety in terms of two or three social classes — high, middle and popular — is a framework that served to explain modernity, but current production shouts out for other guidelines, given that social differentiation has been greatly altered. Indeed, present-day luxury, at least in terms of the world of objects — haute couture, perfumes, cars and motorcycles — can only be understood from the perspective of popular taste and the aesthetics of the masses. This is its current sense; what is exclusive can only be measured in relation to the product of the masses and both are defined by the same logic: the visibility of the brand well above the formal characteristics of the product; reestablishment of *horror vacui* as the predominant aesthetic behaviour; proliferation of showy and affected ornamentation, revealed even by an excess of self-complacent design²². On the other hand, the valuation of modern urban peripheries and their landscapes, produced by urban development schemes that are often objectionable, along with a systematic intention to avoid any gesture of quality in the architecture, accompanies the most interesting and novel cultural manifestations emerging from these areas (music, clothing, graphic design and illustration, literature, comics...), thus establishing a new image of what is normal, and what is good because it is normal. For this same reason, today it is much more difficult to accept, sociologically speaking, that old schema of Papanek, so conceptually colonialist, which defended the need for a design less concerned with the aesthetic and more “social”, or, in other words, oriented to the reality of the world of people, which he qualified as “real”. His argument now falls flat on its face in light of a curious and unforeseen fact, which is that that real world has been absorbed and concentrated in the most exclusive luxury sector, which is the one that produces the most numerous series. How difficult it is to continue understanding the game of the aesthetic in the utilitarian and realize that the key game is precisely here; a good example is the Tata Nano car, the world’s least expensive car (India, 2008). The challenge continues to be to understand that very complex aesthetic dimension, appropriate for humble, discreet and unpretentious things. It is here that the real game of the cultural relevance of design is played out.

(“LECTOR IN FABULA”) THE LINGUISTIC TURN IMPACTS DESIGN CULTURE: THE USER-CENTRED APPROACH BECOMES SERVICE DESIGN

In the field of philosophy and the humanities in general, the 1980s are characterized by the linguistic turn. The label reflects the central role that language, forms of communication and speaking, language games and rhetoric as logic have in the human comprehension and construction of the world. There is a certain logic to the fact that semiotics and the symbolic value of things should have almost entirely substituted functionality in explanatory theories of design. As a consequence, starting in the early 1980s, the design factor was defined and conceptualized as a provider of meaning, as an organizer of the symbolic values of products and services. Afterwards, as symbols ceased to be recognized in the abstract values of the form, in practice this led to a “literalness” in design that aimed to tell stories and transmit symbolic values. The 1990s were a time when even architecture became “mimetic” and “figurative”, incorporating images, drawings and finally projections of films and comics on the facades of emblematic buildings. Literature has influenced the creative methods used to design, as demonstrated by the appearance of procedures such as the storyboard, story-mood and other systems of representation employed to visualize a possible scene and a story to tell. Currently, many designers state that their work consists of storytelling and they often turn to literature for inspiration.

To tell stories is an ancient and enduring human activity cultivated by people from the most disparate and distant cultures: simply by saying “Once upon a time...” the imagination is triggered. Narrating, telling, relating and inventing stories is one of the most important aesthetic practices and one with the largest cultural tradition. The term “literalize” refers to the operation of telling a literary story by means of an object, making use of the evocative capacity that objects may have (does this imply a return to allegory as a rhetorical figure to visualize abstract concepts?). Many classicist and nineteenth century objects decorated with figures and scenes from classical mythology used this resource. Brands from that period built with mythological allegories and figures still exist: Pelikan ink, the Staedtler helmet, and the Fénix (“Phoenix”) insurance company. Nothing new then. Given that the other key characteristic of the world inherited from post-modernity is the predominance of the linguistic turn in all forms of expression, the weight of the aesthetic and of significance now falls on the inevitability of narrating in the social world — and also in historiography, which has recovered the weight of events and the narrative quality of their interpretation. With this, it has been recognized that the only interesting stories are those in which the reader, the listener or the public ends the tale. Thus (and this is an aesthetic behaviour of the first order) the way something is told is no longer all that matters but rather also the invitation to fill with significance the objects that any person uses to live. It is a matter of making use of the evocative capacity they have.

In this sense, if something characterizes the design of services as it has been conceived in recent decades it is the change of focus placed on the reasoning of the designer: previously, the designer conceived the product and the laws of coherence as imposed by the project in and of itself. This is what gave personality and uniqueness to the product, whereas now the designer must take into account the active participation of the end user in the creative process. For this reason, while before thinking of the user, seeing what they do, how they do it and what they might like about the project, was called functionalism, at present, making that same user intervene in the creative process implies a profound conceptual change because the product has become a service in that it must satisfy the specific needs of someone who is highly individualized. In sum, previously, products, utensils, tools, instruments, belongings, goods and stuff were made, but now basically data is produced and actions are plotted out. Put in the light of the large philosophical trends of the era, this change would be both the version and the effects of the

linguistic turn. When it is the interacting user who ends the story, this definitively consolidates global access to the aesthetic universe and the equalization of all tastes, even when they are tastes “that deserve a good beating”, as an old Castilian proverb puts it²³. It is not in vain that the old, classic formula of the variety of tastes that so occupied Kant is now understood as the proliferation of trends.

It is worth mentioning here the concept of Blank Meaning, proposed by Fatima Pombo from the perspective of a phenomenological aesthetic of design. In various publications, Pombo has sought to understand the capacity of good designs to fill themselves with meaning in function of the interests of users at every moment and in every situation. Many authors have already discussed the evocative and emotional capacity of goods; others have tried to grasp the reasons why people feel affection for some things and establish somewhat more affective relations with them than



Figure 18 - Users give meaning just using useful things and building up a system of their own: a corner of the studio of a writer in a rationalistic house in Barcelona (1935). Lamp designed by J.Jucker and W. Wagenfeld at the Bauhaus in Weimar (1923-24), still in production. Book shelves designed in Barcelona 1980s. Ceramic Vase by La Rinascente, 1970s.

the mere instrumental and trusting relations that, as Heidegger pointed out, we expect from them. What is novel and interesting about the concept of Blank Meaning in Pombo's sense is the recognition that the possible dialogue with the user is already foreseen in the design of the object, product, space or graphic work; what is more, each object has a repository of meaning that is at the disposition of the user. This blank in the semantic space of something manufactured and launched on the market is a symbolic space still empty of content, achieved through skilful management of ambiguity in the discourse, which is reserved so that the end of the story it may be added by the interacting agent or user of the design as they wish upon using it²⁴.

UTOPIA IN BEAUTY, THE ABILITY TO FEEL AND KNOW PLEASURE WHILE ENJOYING ONESELF

The importance of aesthetics in daily life is a subject that continually appears in the field of design culture. However, it is rarely dealt with in any detail; more likely, it has served to condemn design for its tendency towards aestheticism or superficiality. As I see it, the real question is precisely the opposite. In a person's normal life, he or she will constantly run up against aesthetic phenomena of all kinds; the majority of these are simple, humble and commonplace, though this does not make them any less important. The aesthetic experiences linked to them are also simple, agreeable, pretty and attractive, though they can be quite intense. For example, family meals are a peak experience amongst the various points of incidence of aesthetics in daily life, something expressed by means of domestic gastronomy, everyday gastronomy, presided by the difficulty of creating something different or just appetizing enough to be eaten various times a day with the ingredients available in any given season, which are not always varied or particularly tasty. Domestic or family gastronomy is the wise result of a long process of trial and error accomplished by female culture over the centuries. At the centre of festive symbolism and routine work

dynamics that are not necessarily repetitive, this gastronomy has long given rise to the creation of community, the place and moment of human encounter around a table, the celebration of community actions in a family setting. In a time such as our own, when the visibility of people, personalities and businesses, as well as ideas, customs and ways of acting, is what distinguishes socially dominant relationships, to consider and keep in mind appearances and their logic is not necessarily a sign of frivolity and trivialization. All appearances, whether unusual or perfectly ordinary, can aspire to be sincere and even authentic in a certain sense, but must be so in coherence with their way of being, a way adjusted to reality²⁵.

The underlying hypothesis is clear: beauty is a human need that, among many other things, consists of a longing for cultural relevance above and beyond the experience of the extraordinary that competes with the Fine Arts — or professionalized designer gastronomy or award-winning restaurants. Everyday things, the daily landscape as a whole, can thus be aesthetically interesting, attractive and appetizing; what is more, these things should be so absolutely. This is part of the utopia of beauty that design made its own in its second historical origin, with the discovery of the importance of the design factor in the context of industrial production and technological creation on multiple levels.



Figure 19 - Table ware collection called “Ola”. Designed by Gemma Bernal & Ass, Barcelona, in 2001 for the Montgatina Company. Porcelain. Picture provided by designer.

The biological basis of aesthetic perception and its role in the sexual game of many animal species has often been commented on²⁶. It seems that beauty, whether prettiness or loveliness, favours sexual attraction between individuals because it is interpreted as a sign of health and thus participates in the genetic selection of the species' reproduction. I always enjoy reading how nature does not economize or skimp on efforts when it comes to reinforcing the aesthetic effect of some animals to favour attraction between the sexes — an extreme case is that of the male peacock's tail, as preached by so many decorative styles that make use of the decorative capacity of the bird's feathers as an ornamental motif. For this reason, *pavonearse*²⁷ in Spanish means excessive aesthetic behaviour, annoying for being overly affected. Viewed in ethical terms, “aestheticist” behaviours like this are seen as false and in poor taste because they are excessive; worst of all is that they become annoying and disagreeable. However, in such cases, blame should not lie in the aesthetic quality implicit in the aspect of customs, ways of acting and objects, but rather in the affectation and excesses by which they are resolved. They are an expressive form of ethical and aesthetic tackiness. It is worth calling attention to this, as it is just one among many kinds of ethical behaviour whose appreciation is of an aesthetic type, even if they are the material expression of values of a social or moral type. Ostentation for ostentation's sake, or the desire for ostentation, are similar conducts given that they also manage the aesthetic as an expressive procedure and are revealed through the logic of the forms, materials and appearance of things. It is not in vain that so many kinds of behaviour that arise as aesthetic perversions end up generating (once adopted by tribes in the game of social identities) aesthetic categories of a simply descriptive nature (*cursi*, *afectado* or snob, *hortera*, *cutre*, and so on)²⁸. More than enough examples of this exist, although, as

one might expect, the negative or insulting categories are much more numerous than those of an admiring kind.

At this point, it may seem that this reflection has now looped back on itself and on historical cycles. Once the aesthetic as a phenomenon is removed from the elitist logic of class, the aesthetic experience becomes a human experience common to all people, as verified by the variety of existing tastes and confirmed, at the same time, by the capacity of the aesthetic to signal the most diverse social and ideological identities above and beyond the relations of domination between only two social classes. In this sense, a novelty of the period is the coexistence of many different forms of beauty, all equally legitimate. While formally distinct, they can reach comparable degrees of aesthetic quality and cultural interest. From this perspective, beauty, like good design — as well as “non-intentional” ugliness — can arise in all types of tastes, and even be enriched by such variety. The aesthetic utopia is thus constituted by an ideal to be reached in all cases, fields and contexts, although this is not always easy. Its utopian dimension refers back to the first conceptualizations of the aesthetic, those that discovered the complex process of refinement of the senses and sensibilities upon which it rests, recognizing in this way that the cultivation of the senses participates in the long and complex process by which the human species has cultured itself and civilized social communities.

In effect, the cultivation of the senses, of all the senses, develops the most elemental aesthetic experiences, which are those of a sensorial nature, of the perceptive capacity possessed by people to function in the world. They are found in the ordinary, everyday, commonplace, prosaic universe, that which sparks pleasure and aesthetic experience. The pleasure of a hot bath can be nothing but mere hedonism, quite distant from extraordinary aesthetic emotions, but it can also help generate awareness of one’s own body and feeling something on one’s skin while delighting in it — herein lies the importance, the awareness of aesthetic pleasure when it is experienced. The appetizing quality of the dishes on which the family meal is served, the visual promise of flavour and the evocation of known flavours is another example of the synergy between the senses in aesthetic terms. The pleasure of a hot bath, the pleasantness of comfortable, calm rest, the delicacy of bodily sensations — these are only the starting point, but in the everyday world they can make the forthcoming leap possible.

Even though it is a natural faculty of the human species, immediate and inevitable, aesthetic enjoyment is nonetheless not evident. It is not a simple matter to appreciate and know how to appreciate the factors of aesthetic differentiation; nor is enjoyment of them simple. Time, tenacity, will and effort are all required. In aesthetics, it is not enough to enjoy and be aware that one is enjoying pleasant contemplation and having an aesthetic experience, it is also necessary to refine the focuses of pleasure, consciously feeling that one is experimenting this pleasure and delighting in it as much as possible. When this occurs, the sensorial is combined with sensibility and sentiments in the game involving all faculties, just as the classical philosophers stated long ago. The aesthetic state in the life of people caricatured by Kierkegaard is not as elemental as he claimed, but rather demands a process of personal education and cultivation of the senses at all levels, both sensorial and intellectual. The “wow factor”, that feeling of admiration before something that reveals itself to be very special without ceasing to be what it is, is discovered only if one is prepared to recognize it and predisposed to appreciating it. Only then might it be admired. This type of aesthetic competence results from the education of taste, the faculty of tasting, savouring and judging in a sensorial, even voluptuous, way. It furthermore helps to experiment with, seek out and create new flavours. As the French sociologist of taste, Antoine Hennion, has stated, a culture such as oenology is formed through the aesthetic appreciation of wine, which implies enjoying wine alone or with friends, delighting in the pleasure of the senses, while also understanding with the intellect the implicit wisdom such tasting brings: knowledge, techniques, a know-

how and knowing how to be. Nor is it strange for a designer to praise the transparency of glass because it favours the appreciation of the chromatic quality of red wine when looked at and when the glass is raised to one's mouth. The aim here is to explain the many decisions that a designer makes in order to improve aesthetic enjoyment, as a function is also being carried out. In its day, Sony did a great deal of research to find the material most agreeable to the touch when manufacturing the keyboards of its machines and computers²⁹.

Given that cultivating taste requires effort, time and money, it is no surprise that socially “good taste”, a relative concept if ever one existed, generally denotes a certain class or tribe awareness; definitively, the social group aware of itself. As a consequence, historically, stylish elegance, delicacy of gesture and refinement of taste have been identifying elements of class and more specifically of the dominant classes, the elites. However, the fact that



Figure 20 - New products of silicon to cook designed by the Studio Compeixalaigua (Xavier Flores and Ruth Pérez) and made by the Lékúé Company (Spain), 2011. Gold Delta ADI FAD Award

taste takes pleasure in appreciating the quality of things should not be motive for concluding that quality is the expression of a single type of taste, of a single “aesthetic” model, to state it in terms of current marketing trends. Quite the contrary: all trends or “aesthetics” have their own references of quality and can aspire to their finest expressions. One hundred years of mass culture and industrial cultures have launched very good creations into universal culture and they are good precisely because they do not pretend to be anything other than products for the masses. Countless examples can be found of this since Pop Art and its recovery of this culture for its cultural values.

NULLA ESTHETICA SINE ETHICA: THE UTOPIA OF BEAUTY: HUMANIST POTENTIAL AND THE VALUE OF LITTLE THINGS

“Culture relates to objects and is a phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to people and is a phenomenon of life.”³⁰ Hannah Arendt

One might well object that this simple aesthetic vision of the everyday world has to do with a highly elemental aesthetic dimension, prosaic and without transcendence. This may be so, yet the question concerning aesthetics, at least in the world of design, is found in this context: when is beauty commonplace? What does it mean to be beautiful in the everyday world? The latter question involves questioning whether it is worth it to continue being concerned about the aesthetics of the everyday landscape, the stage upon which the representation of life is played out. Truth be told, even when everyday life is characterized by a certain regularity and constancy, the response cannot be easy. Plato already warned us of this, just after discussing the possible beauty of clay cooking pots: “Fine things are difficult.” (*Hippias Major*)

As we have seen, the key factor is the process of refinement that aesthetic appreciation and delight impose on people, on all people regardless of their condition. Montaigne summed this up with a simple phrase: aesthetics is “what makes man human”. A few centuries later, other thinkers saw in aesthetic development a process whereby people were humanized, something equivalent to the fulfilment of ethical imperatives in a happy life. A quote from Hannah Arendt opens this section. Another quote from the same book perfectly summarizes the ultimate content of the “*utopia della bellezza*”, our essential focus of reflection:

“If it be the case, it is only a question of taste, which constantly judges the things of the world, setting out limits and giving the realm of culture a human meaning. Or, what is the same, its function consists of debarbarizing culture ... taste is the faculty whereby culture is humanized.” (Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 63)

To conclude then, let us consider a brief dialogue between designers. Once again, in supporting my arguments, I turn to the words of Rick Poynor in defence of beauty and the need for it in our world. In an online debate kept within a closed group, Poynor threw out to his fellow designers the questions concerning him when writing the cited essay:

“I am writing a piece about design and design thinking for I.D. magazine. I would very much appreciate your answer(s) to these two questions: 1. Does design have a cultural value beyond its business uses and functional purpose and, if it does, what is that cultural value? 2. If you think that design does have a cultural value, then what contribution does the level of aesthetic quality in a design make to its cultural value?”³¹

In the article finally written he sought to respond affirmatively by commenting on some of the replies he had received. From his dialogue with Michael Beirut he garners something that very clearly responds to this problematic utopia of beauty:

“In some ways, you might argue that aesthetic value — for an enduring design, at least — is the only lasting value, since over time functional needs can change and business moves on to the next goal.” (Poynor, *op. cit.*, 2008)

The lasting nature of things guarantees this idea of the sense of aesthetic value in and of itself. Lasting value is also what explains the relevance of certain traditions integrated in objects and tools, as is what happens with the most common of them. Later on he seeks to succinctly define what simple, humble, intimate and wise beauty might consist of, present as it is in beautiful, daily objects. Citing a colleague (Dori Tunstall), the critic reveals what the utopia of beauty might consist of, as a way of explaining the pleasure of life: “There is an inherent intelligence to beauty, which is about the depth and passion we feel for the world.” Poynor continues by taking on something as ambiguous as explaining the aesthetic value of things with words:

“Give me something tangible, something brilliant and extraordinary that illuminates our perception of what human life can be. For that, we still need designers.” (Poynor, *op. cit.*, 2008)

Anna Calvera (2016)

Notes:

¹
In Spanish, “lo feo no se vende”. Translated from the Spanish the phrase would read “ugliness does not sell” (1955). The English book was entitled *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* (1951).

²
Concluding words of Alessandro Mendini in his speech for the ceremony in his honour, organized by the ADI FAD, Barcelona, December 14, 2015: “...because deep in the heart of all designers there is always the utopia of beauty.”

³
“If something will save us, it will be beauty.” “Ettore Sottsass”, obituary, *El País*, January 3, 2008.

⁴
Rick Poynor: “Down with Innovation”, *I.D. Magazine*, April 22, 2008. *The Design Observer Archive*, 08/02/11: <<http://designobserver.com/feature/from-the-archive-down-with-innovation/29188/>>. Visited 01/05/16.

⁵
Anna Calvera: “Cuestiones de fondo: la hipótesis de los tres orígenes del diseño”, in Isabel Campi (ed.), *Diseño e Historia: Tiempo, Lugar y Discurso*, Mexico City: Designio, 2010, pp. 63-85.

⁶
On the ordinary-extraordinary dichotomy as applied to definitions of art and design, see the chapter by Fernando Martín Juez: “Ordinario y extraordinario”, in Anna Calvera (ed.), *Arte ¿? Diseño*, Barcelona: GG, 2003, pp. 231-247.

⁷
Interview with Ettore Sottsass, in Jordi Mañà, *El diseño industrial*, Barcelona: Salvat, 1973, p. 19.

⁸
“Cursi” means kitschy or tacky.

⁹
For the case of Spain, see Pilar Vélez: “On the Relationship between Art and Industry: A Cultural Debate in the Nineteenth Century, the Precursor of Industrial Design”, in Anna Calvera (ed.), *From Industry to Art: Barcelona 1714-1914*, Barcelona: GG, 2013, pp. 67-96.

¹⁰
On That is, from 1906 to 1971 in design terms, and from 1914 to 1989 in general history terms. The “short 20th century” was proposed by E. Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Vintage Books, 1994.

¹¹
Mário de Sá Carneiro, “Manucure”, Futurist poem in *Orpheu*, no. 2, Lisbon, June 1915. In Luis Ferreira: *Artes gráficas en Portugal en el periodo de las vanguardias históricas (1909-1926): el grafismo de las revistas literarias del movimiento de vanguardia portugués*. Doctoral Thesis, Barcelona:

Department of Design and Visual Arts, University of Barcelona, 2014, pp. 100-107.

¹²
Ettore Sottsass, cited interview, 1977: 17-19. Sottsass refers to different beauties: “the futurist beauty of merchandise... numerical beauty...new typographical sensibility...pure alphabetical beauty.”

¹³
The defence of the universal character of the language of design, widely demonstrated by the triumph of electronic devices in the world, has been a constant in the papers presented by Tevfik Balcioglu in two particular ICDHS congresses (Istanbul 2002, and Taipei 2016).

¹⁴
On the updating of cosmopolitanism as a way of thinking that refers to all of humanity, see Norbert Bilbeny, *La identidad cosmopolita (los límites del patriotismo en la era global)*, Barcelona: Kairós, 2007; and Yves Charles Zarka, *Réfondre le cosmopolitisme*, Paris: PUF, 2014. This latter writer considers the phenomenon of aestheticization an indicator of an ongoing dehumanization of the world, or just as well one of its causes, a subject this paper takes a position on from the very start.

¹⁵
Many creators sought to deal with design in terms of its links to architecture and the fine arts system. In this sense, Giulio Carlo Argan’s prologue from 1977 to the Spanish version of Tomás Maldonado’s *El diseño industrial reconsiderado* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1977), was both damning and revealing. In an increasingly more focussed sense of the concept, it is worth recalling the reflections of Barcelona novelist and critic Joan Perucho on the expressive nature of design, from the period from 1960 to 1970. For an analysis of his ideas, see Anna Calvera: “Gráfica versus Plástica”, in *Pensar la publicidad*, Vol. 6 (2012): UCM & U. Valladolid: <<https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/PEPU/article/view/40642>>.

¹⁶
In spite of being an accusation against the European theory of design, this was a posture taken up on both sides of the Atlantic. It is implicit to the definitions of *Good Design*, *Gute Form* or *Bel Design*. For his part, in 1979 Raymond Loewy said the following, in reference to the foundational period of American design: “The pioneers were naive: apart from wanting to make a living from our work, we all believed that by means of the function, safety, quality and appearance of a product we were delivering something valuable to the consumer, to his aesthetic sense, and through this, to the nation itself.” (*Diseño industrial*, Barcelona: Blume, 1990, p. 36). For his part, in 1949 George Nelson said the following in an article published in *Fortune*: “Concentration on what may sell and what may not ...has merely served to keep the design level down to a safe mediocrity.” (Cited in *Design & Industry*, 47, December 1947, London, p. 242).

¹⁷
Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

18

“The creative eighties are original everywhere“. In Oscar Salinas-Flores: “Design transformation: the effect of global change and the reconceptualization of design in Mexico and Latin America since the 1980s”, ICDHS 10, Taipei 2016.

19

Oscar Salinas-Flores, 2016, op. cit.: “Social changes such as the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the redefinition of political and cultural objectives in China and rising commodity prices in developing countries, such as Latin America and the Middle East, generated classes with greater procurement capacity, better quality of life and an aspiration to live in a new culture of global consumption, influenced by new media interconnected via satellite and fiber optics.”

20

For an updated version of the journalistic articles of Mendini, see Loredana Parmesani (ed.), *Alessandro Mendini. Scritti*, Geneva and Milan: Fondazione Ambrosetti Arte Contemporanea and Skira, 2004.

21

Currently, references to both are frequent. Most of these ideas are found spread throughout various books. In the case of Lipovetsky, the affirmation appears early in *L'ère du vide* (1983), and is upheld in his books dealing with fashion. For Bourdieu, see *Distinction* (1979).

22

Here I use the synthetic portrait of postmodern aestheticization as proposed by Verónica Devalle in *La travesía de la forma*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2009.

23

The proverb literally goes like this: “Sobre gustos no hay nada escrito, pero hay gustos que merecen palos” (There is nothing written in stone about taste, but some tastes deserve a good beating).

24

Fatima Pombo (2001), “Desire and destiny of things”, in the 4th European Academy of Design Conference d3- *Desire, Designum, Design*, University of Aveiro, Aveiro, Portugal, April 2001. Fatima Pombo & Anna Calvera: “The Aesthetics of Everyday Things: Phenomenological Understanding of Design Users”, 7th ICDHS Brussels 2010: “The concept of blank meaning was created by Fátima Pombo as a filling of a conceptual need that could express the freedom in the territory of *Dasein* while a desiring subject faces the experience of things. So, by blank meaning we mean the interpretation each individual makes of one thing (object) besides its ‘objective’ qualities. This depends on both the object and the subject, but not in an expected way, once the interpretation is ascribed by each individual based on his/her own subjective interpretation and constitution of his/her *Umwelt*.”

25

See Fulvio Carmagnola: *La visibilità. Per un'estetica dei fenomeni complessi*, Milan: Guerini, 1989. Martin Seel (2000/1st ed.): *Estética del aparecer* (Spanish translation), Buenos Aires: Katz editores, 2010.

26

Jean-Marie Schaeffer: “Aesthetic experience, knowledge and pleasure”, inaugural lecture, October 5, 2011, EINA Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art de Barcelona, Barcelona.

27

“Pavonearse” derives from the Spanish word for peacock, “pavo real” (literally “royal turkey”).

28

These negative categories come from the Spanish tongue spoken in Spain. Apart from the term “cursi” (kitsch or tacky), found in all Spanish languages and dialects across the world, the others (*hortera* and *cutre*) have their equivalents in all countries, as they correspond to social identities and differentiating modes of urban tribes.

29

Antoine Hennio: “Pour une pragmatique du gout”, in *Papiers De Recherche Du Csi – CSI Working Papers Series*, No. 001, Paris: Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation, 2005. Available online (visited Spring, 2016). The designer speaking of the wine glass is Richard Redgrave, editor of the *Journal of Design*, London, around the year 1851. See Anna Calvera: “A Hot Cup of Consomee”, in *TdD 16*, Barcelona: Elisava Publicacions, 2000. Online at: <<http://tdd.elisava.net/coleccion/disseny-tecnologia-comunicacio-cultura-2000/calvera-en>>.

30

Hannah Arendt: *Más allá de la filosofía. Escritos sobre cultura, arte y literatura*, Fina Birulés and Ángela Lorena Fuster (eds.), Madrid: Trotta, 2014, p. 41. The quote following is from p. 63.

31

Rick Poynor querying Van Pater in this latter’s blog, in *nEXTd*, 2008 debate; consulted 2009. Already disappeared from the web since social networks appeared.