Returning the aesthetics to the heart of the design process. On the conflict between social design and product beauty

Mario de Liguori

POLITECNICO di MILANO – Dipartimento di Design
Research Doctoral Programme in Design for products, strategies and services.
*Corresponding author e-mail:

Abstract: The design research today, massively aimed toward ecology and social inclusion, frees designers from the condition of mere experts of goods, promoting them to that of thinkers and activists of socio-environmental system. Doing this, are designers risking to neglect the product beauty, forgetting the aesthetics purpose in name of the ethic one? The methodology to answer has been mostly qualitative and theoretical, then partially experimental. Studying aesthetics in philosophy and art, it has used a historical-epistemological approach, professional and didactical experiences. Beyond the general extensive literature on design ethics, the method has tended to focus on the less explored conflict between the ethical and aesthetic dimensions in design today, applying an unpublished aesthetics grid analysis. The results confirm a latent tendency in modern education and research, to neglect goods aesthetics, because of a new ‘social-functionalism’, ideologically relegating the design of shapes to the status of an inferior, executive phase.

Keywords: Aesthetics & Ethics, Social design drift, Industrial Design, Epistemology of design, Aesthetic damage.
1. Introduction

The aesthetics of physical products is a value that can no longer be taken for granted in design today and is less obvious than in the past. Nowadays the aesthetics dimension in design has been thrown into crisis because of interdisciplinary nature of design itself, its feathered edges and the continuous critical revisionism about this discipline.

Design is inherently fluid and was a flexible, innovative item in the rigid world of the industrial economy into which it was born. However, flexibility is no longer a value for design but rather almost a weakness. In the context of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000), design is a fluid among fluids which risks being diluted in the context, losing its identity and distinctive purpose, firstly its aesthetic purpose.

Rightly focused on the most urgent and pressing socio-environmental problems, design research has lately distanced itself from material things themselves and then from their aesthetics.

1.1 Difficulties in interpreting modernity

Over recent years social transformation such as exponential growth in new technologies, has changed verbal and non-verbal languages and the way in which they are codified. Common people, and professionals too, no longer have the judgment parameters with which to understand global culture let alone those required to overcome the difficulties involved in speaking a common language among generations.

The traditional disciplines no longer have the necessary tools to codify new stable rules or solid paradigms before they collapse. The speed in which languages are evolving is preventing us from identifying the visual signs taken by aesthetics in the near future. It is impossible to find one, unambiguous way of interpreting the contemporary because of the plurality of languages and the speed with which they change.

The historicism filter equally sometimes seems unable to interpret what happens, even that absorbed or diluted into fluid modernity.

Designing new aesthetics in design nowadays for professionals means accepting swimming within chaos of signs, a huge ocean of information, countless messages, with a serious risk of drowning.

In this complex and confused scenario, designers feel somehow inadequate and lose their original role in designing modernity. For the same reason design academies and research centres have diversified their study topics and sometimes moved too far away from aesthetics.

1.2 Postmodernism: an inadequate term

A question posed by the conference was - what are Postmodernism’s new languages?

There is clearly no simple answer to this question but it may be possible to use a different and less travelled approach. For instance it is wrong to take for granted the definition of ‘post-modern’ itself, in reference to our own age. The word is often hollow and over-used, in general terms, to define everything we do not understand about the contemporary world. The “(...) contemporary global
scenario is, in fact, very different from the world we imagined up to two decades ago, in which the postmodern formula seemed to clarify the meaning of new transformations” (Pasca 2010).

At its best this term is an outdated or clumsy way of representing massive contemporary change. Definitions of Postmodern combine unsolved modernity issues such as the environment which would probably be better tackled by a rationalist-modernist approach. Well represented and interpreted, the latter could well be more useful in the environmental context than postmodern ideologies. For many thinkers, in fact, modern environmentalism heralds a new industrial future (Myerson 2001) to be approached by means of a new ‘positive’ rationalism.

Thus it follows from all this discussion that understanding what the next aesthetics might be is rather different from seeking style trends as mere fashion trendsetters do. It is rather a matter for serious historians and critics and probably not only those engaged in the design field. The research question itself should thus perhaps be formulated in a different way.

1.3 Redefining the research question

Beyond the difficulties of this task, discover new languages is mandatory for design, in order to orient consumers/citizens in such a plural world, while helping politics and economics, in facing social changes and difficulties understanding each other in the ‘global village’ (McLuhan 1962). With the simplification which leads on from designers’ visual abilities, helping people and authorities to make important decisions has aimed at beauty as a universal value going beyond verbal language, age, status, race, economy or other differences with the aim of rapidly finding an alphabet of shapes and signs capable of improving our lives, representing modernity and making it easier to understand.

Nowadays the mainstream of design research, rightly oriented towards the environment and social inclusion, from co-design and design activism’s bottom-up approach to the top-down approach of design for politics, apparently frees industrial designers from the condition of mere goods experts and moves them toward the more important role of socio-environmental systems thinkers or activists. Doing this in such a massive way, however, risks diluting design’s original identity and in it losing its pursuit of beauty rationale and forgetting its natural goods ‘aesthete’ role?
2. Methodology

2.1 Efforts to measure beauty scientifically

The method chosen by this present work to a research issue of this complexity has been mostly theoretical, led by historical and epistemological studies and professional and teaching experience. The aesthetics topic has been a difficult one to approach by means of quantitative and analytical tools. For this reason the analysis originated with general ‘aesthetics’ studies in philosophy and the arts.

It was only in a second phase that attempts were made to translate the theoretical preliminary studies into early experimental and practical tools, such as interviews and questionnaires gathering unconscious information from experts and less expert about design subject.

The methodology used a qualitative approach based on the comparison of images taken from the social and industrial design scenario. Interviewees were asked to judge a range of objects, situations and design processes in the pictures from an unpublished tool called Aesthetics Grid Analysis (following AGA).

2.2 Aesthetics Grid Analysis: the sample

The sample consists of 20 persons; the interviews currently held are 40 (2 interviews each interviewee) but they are almost a test, still a preliminary study, before the actual experimentation. After this sort of beta-test, the study should be conducted in a wider manner, using the adequate number of interviews in order to make the results quantitatively meaningful.

The AGA method has assumed the engagement of the following actors:

- N.1 researcher: he leads the survey, interpreting the data (conscious of the actual research purpose).
- N. 4 design students (partially conscious of the research aim). They were the finders of images and the interviewers.
- N. 10 interviewees (type A) Experts in design (non-conscious).
- N. 10 interviewees (type B) Non-Experts in design (non-conscious).

Type A: they were scholars, professors and professionals in design field. Particularly they were N. 3 professors from Italian Universities in design (age within 45-60); N. 4 PhD candidates in design (from 29 to 35 years old) and N. 3 professionals engaged in design business (age within 30-55).

Type B: they were non-experts in design. Different each other for age but generally similar for social background they were all graduated, holding at least a bachelor degree or a master degree; 5 male and 5 female within 26 and 60 years old.

2.3 Aesthetics Grid Analysis: a twofold maieutic tool

The AGA assumes two contrasting kinds of maieutic tools/questionnaires, the first only visual (aimed at assessing pure, aesthetic judgment) and the second also verbal/dialectic.

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1 In addition to well-known Gestalt psychology, important attempts to scientifically measure aesthetics have been done in the history of science by the positivist approach often drifting into art psychology or sociology when not cultural anthropology or linguistics (Vattimo 1981).
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The methodology used was specifically created for this research and aimed to practically test the conflict between beauty and ethics in design perception.

In both cases the most impartial methods possible were used and the ultimate aim of the research was never explained to the interviewees.

FIRST METHOD

The first method used in the AGA system was, then, mostly based on visual communication, specifically designed to source not conscious, pure aesthetic opinions from the interviewees but rather immediate and sensitive ones (impressions driven by interviewees’ instinctive feelings).

Interviewees were called on to express simply an aesthetic preference in relation to the images shown in terms of beauty, comparing two photos. The first picture was taken from a social innovation design scenario and the second was the corresponding item taken from a typical product/industrial design scenario.

Practically speaking, on one hand interviewees were asked to express an opinion about images related to a design for social innovation process: co-design, concept generation methods like the ‘post-it design’ (Manzini 2013) and other tools and images related to the typical social design scenario and its final products as outcomes.

On the other hand, the same individuals were asked to judge images related to a product or other items such as prototypes, team working scenes, sketches and technical drawings from a traditional industrial design process.

Both the categories of pictures were divided in:

- Images of Products
- Images of Project
- Images of Process and Production

The criteria used to select the images were as uncritical as possible. Four students in art and design were asked to select images from the Internet. On the basis of different search themes and predetermined keywords, they had to choose what they considered the best pictures and the best subjects in terms of beauty.

The resolution and technical quality of the images chosen had to be the same for both categories, social design and product design, in order to avoid interviewees potentially being influenced by picture quality, enabling them to judge the beauty of the subjects pictured in the photos rather than any differences in the beauty of the photos themselves.

After the students had made their selections, the author of the questionnaire made a final selection from the images chosen in order to select those most coherent with research aims.

The general AGA system can be better understood and summarized in the following example of images below.
As I mentioned above the interviewees had no idea of the topic of the research and had to express beauty and aesthetic perception judgements on images numerically measured (from 1 to 5) on each subject. The aim was to reach the most emotional and sensorial area of respondents’ brains comparing their conscious, rationally and culturally filtered reactions only later. The survey used pictures instead of words to gain honest responses from interviewees, a sensitive response, the most ancient and instinctive way of evaluating the beauty of things, the quickest and most profound cognitive tool. “There is nothing in the intellect that was not firstly in the senses” 2. In the Kritik der Urteils kraft (1790) the philosopher I. Kant clearly states that beauty is the perception of a pure universal aesthetic pleasure disconnected from any interest and conceptuality. It is the “scientia cognitionis sensitivae” (Baumgarten 1750-58).

SECOND METHOD
The second method used was instead a more typical explicit questionnaire, which took the form of semi-structured interviews in order to garner more rational answers on the same two topics (social design or industrial design).

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2 This is the author’s translation of the famous Latin sentence: “nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu”. The attribution cuts through the classical culture of the Sensist philosophers of the Renaissance via St. Thomas through English philosopher J. Locke to German thinker Leibniz with some additions.
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Differently by the first one, this method was designed to prompt reasoned answers culturally influenced by external factors (civic responsibility, socio-environmental advertising campaigns, newspapers, commonplaces, individual or collective moral judgments, etc.).

3. Results and discussion
In the next two paragraphs we will try to sum up on the one hand the theoretical investigation did before the research and, on the other hand, the second paragraph shows the experimental data resulting from AGA survey, which confirm the existence of a concrete gap in design nowadays between its ethical and aesthetic missions in research.

3.1 Theoretical outcomes
The results of this first part of the research are obviously the most questionable because of their theoretical nature. In any event it will be useful to show some original views based on a journey through philosophy and art studies as well as through product design and design for social innovation.

DESIGN IS (ALMOST) DEAD
Let’s start our discussion by playing devil’s advocate: industrial design is (almost) dead! Just as in the death of art forecast by Hegel’s idealism and consequently in practice in the twentieth century with the artistic avant-garde, in the twenty-first we are witnessing the disappearance of the design aesthetics. Absorbed into a sort of social-design driven ideology, it is nowadays losing its bond with the physical shape of material things. A sort of secession between project and product: an especially heated latent fight between social project and industrial product.

By highlighting mostly the ‘project’ meaning within the word design we are gradually losing the equally important meaning of ‘drawing’ deriving from Latin etymology.

Lately some authors have condemned this conflict in design. This criticism has come mainly from design historians or those scholars or professionals who have generally historical backgrounds; maybe the long-term coherence of the discipline is properly up to them. Renewing design does not necessarily mean forgetting its own history. In the wake of Platonism, in fact, Aby Warburg said that, ‘knowing is remembering’. Too often lately, on the contrary, design renewal has taken a distance from its recent past.

Postmodern culture has mistakenly removed the physical dimension from art and design.

As well as for fine arts, aesthetics research is a founding pillar for design, it supports design in a structural way. The physical and sensorial dimensions legitimize the very existence of that discipline positioning it in the economic, productive and social environment.

In the context of such vast goods production, in the chaos of shapes, the defense of beauty is even more fundamental today! Design must necessarily act within material culture, because design belongs to “[…] a material culture that has paradoxically moved away from the peculiarity of the material dimension of objects[…]” in which “[…] words as shape and aesthetics do not find enough space […]” (Cristallo 2015).

3 Referring to Hegel’s lectures at Heidelberg and Berlin between 1818 and 1829, published by his disciple Hoto, H.G.
4 Some go to the extent of identifying the death of art with the rise of industrial design itself (Mecacci 2009).
5 De “signum” = sign.
Aesthetics in design is a "[...] conditio sine qua non" (Russo 2012), closely related to the ethics issue. Therefore the real challenge is rather to combine aesthetic with ethical goals, "[...] the founding nucleus of design is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics" (Pasca, 2012).

However this aim nowadays seems to be disregarded drifted in a dangerous dichotomy.

**ASTHETICS OF ACTIONS VERSUS THAT OF THINGS**

The relationship between social design and aesthetics is the subject of several papers and recent debates\(^6\), which are making evident a more or less latent dichotomy.

On one side is the ideological aesthetic of action in design - intellectually driven by ethical aims - and, on the other side, the physical aesthetic of goods - driven by the senses and hedonistic needs.

“The aesthetics of action in new social design” (Koskinen 2016) shifts the aim of design from the physical aesthetic of things, to moral “beauty” of a social and shared action.

The “aesthetic action” can pass through the dialog, as theorized in “design culture and dialogic design” (Manzini, 2016), or can be directly and fully implemented on the field, as told in the “disruptive aesthetics of design activism” (Markussen 2013). Anyway both views, the dialogic and the activist, unavoidably relegate the object shape design into a mere inferior and executive phase, in moving the design of aesthetics from the objects (material) to the actions (immaterial).

Theoretical research has given us an understanding that design for the next aesthetics means firstly restoring the right relationship between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions.

The aesthetic-hedonistic society is very dangerous without an ethical control. But ethical action without aesthetics is dangerous too. Nobel Prize winner Brodskij stated that aesthetics “is the mother of ethics”. With particular reference to the ugliness generated by ideological Socialist regimes in fact, he recognises\(^7\) in politics the strict dependence of ethical action on aesthetic purpose. Ethics detached from aesthetics of material things creates in the same way a negative world.

**A SOCIAL AESTHETIC HISTORY**

It is ‘also fair to say that design has pursued its own social aim since the beginnings although not to the extent or in the same way as today. Ethics was already part of design history. From the fight against excessive industrialization, driven by the Arts and Crafts movement, to the Rationalist movement itself, which looked to industrial design as tool with which to improve peoples’ lives in every scale or dimension\(^8\).

Perhaps those positions were too romantic\(^9\) or ideological but they implemented ethical purposes through product aesthetic tools enclosed within the boundaries of beauty research and never beyond it. Never to the same extent as today have ethical aims in design seemed to put aesthetics at risk. Today design is so focused on ethical purposes that it too often overlooks the aesthetics results of its social action.

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\(^{6}\) It is important to mention the last seminar called Social Design and Aesthetics (Polifactory, Milan, June 2016).

\(^{7}\) Brodskij, I. A., *Dall’esilio*, Adelphi, Milano 1988.

\(^{8}\) The Nathan Rogers' slogan “From the spoon to the city” (*Carta di Atene*, 1952) well expressed this global ambition.

\(^{9}\) The adjective “romantic” is not a moral judgement but refers simply to the Romantic movement as cultural cradle of thinkers such as J. Ruskin and W. Morris, to which the Arts and Craft refers.
THE REASONS

However, recent aesthetics and ethics in design conflicts are probably related to a deeper crisis of industrial design.

On one hand a sort of identity crisis due the difficulty for design to maintain its role as interpreter of reality, to translate the contemporary into visible signs or tangible objects. In a world packed with signs and information, designers are no longer those orienting the users, who are nowadays sometimes autonomous in this respect.

On the other hand, design research is apparently moving away from the material nature of the traditional economy - industry and private interest – because industrial goods themselves look like inherently polluting. Design has therefore thrown itself into social innovation as a primary goal coming back ethnically correct in a sort of self-purification process and neglecting the aesthetic as dangerously dirty and licentious.

It is certainly incumbent on design to be aware of social and environmental issues, taking part in the new, more sustainable growth of technology and industry but it should avoid epistemological mistakes such as, for instance, overlapping with the tools and purpose of sociology in fact: "[...] it becomes imperative for designers [...] not to give in to all the disciplinary aberrations that act in the name of transversality, opening up design to social science practices and methods [...]" (Martino 2015).

Starting with the top-down approach of design for policy making, or directly from the co-design bottom-up approach in society¹⁰, nowadays, social design rightly reminds us the social mission and ethic aims of design.

However, on the other hand, it unwittingly or ideologically works against design’s aesthetic nature, generating outcomes not always beautiful in terms of product design.

3.2 AGA outcomes

This section mainly shows the results of the first survey, based on images and unconscious answers. Following are shown 2 tables: the first one related to non-experts sample and the second to the non-experts. The first column of the tables illustrates the subjects/categories of the pictures shown to the interviewees. The second and third columns are related to the two fields of analysis (social design or industrial design). In the center of the tables are the evaluation averages in both fields. Evaluation was expressed on a scale from 1 to 5 (1= ugly, 5= wonderful).

Table 1. AGA results: summary data of survey N. 1 (for images) carried out on a sample of 20 ordinary people (category identify as non-experts)

| Subjects of Pictures | Design for Social Innovation | Industrial Design (Design 4 Industry) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Image of Product     | 3,9                         | 4,5                                  |
| Image of Project     | 3,6                         | 4,5                                  |
| I. of Process & Production | 4,3                        | 3,9                                  |

¹⁰ At a time “[...] when everybody is designing (Manzini 2015)
Table 2. AGA results: summary data of survey N. 1 (for images) carried out on a sample of 20 designers, scholars and other people working in design field (category identify as experts)

| Subjects of Pictures | Design for Social Innovation | Industrial Design (Design 4 industry) |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Image of Product     | 3,7                           | 4,6                                  |
| Image of Project     | 3,8                           | 4,6                                  |
| I. of Process & Production | 4,4                      | 4,1                                  |

It is clear that the data results from the two tables present more similarities than differences. They clearly show that both experts and non-experts prefer industrial design Product and Project images to social innovation pictures, except for a slight preference for Process & Production category, in which social innovation wins, though for few points. In any case the industrial design scenario emerges as the winner and the differences between experts and non-experts are almost imperceptible.

The results of the second survey based on verbal communication, explicit questions and more weighted answers, on the other hand, generated different and unexpected outcomes.

There is no space here to show the full questionnaire and results but we can briefly summarize the answers, which revealed very different opinions between expert and non-expert respondents. In the experts’ rational answers, has been found a sort of Increasing Factor Intellectually Driven (IFID) regarding the social Innovation. In that questionnaire, in fact, the answers of the experts were mostly in favor of social innovation and then less coherent with the images chosen in the first task, while those of the non-experts showed the highest rate of coherence with the answers given in the previous questionnaire.

4. Conclusion

Taking the AGA method as reliable it can be argued that the idea, intellectually and rationally driven by a sense of ethical-social responsibility is conflicting with the natural search for product beauty, and it is especially prevalent among experts in design.

Beauty in goods would appear lately to have been ideologically demonized in design research, perhaps considered superfluous or latently harmful as compared to the higher aim of ethical and ideological design or wrongly associated with the hedonistic idea of economic liberalism or luxury and perhaps mistakenly identified with bulimic and untenable consumerism fed by industrialization.

However industrial goods certainly cannot themselves be guilty of pollution and social inequity and neither can aesthetic research into product design, which must remain central to design research and rather be implemented from a contemporary perspective.

In design research and training we are facing a sort of a neo-social-functionalism devoid of aesthetics, risking erasing the goals painstakingly achieved over design history, relegating the aesthetics of products to a minor executive phase, emptying industrial design of that creative and systemic value, identify as design thinking.

Harmony between aesthetic purpose of design and the ethic one is an historic debate which must be refounded through a deeper (and better placed) dialogue between Industrial Design and Social Design, because a ugly world cannot be really fair!
4.1 Improvable aspects of research

The research was just a sort of beta-test and even demonstrated a number of weaknesses. AGA method deserves more in-depth exploration in the future. In particular the criteria and keywords used to find and select images in the two surveys.

Particularly the questionnaire in survey no. 2 could perhaps be better structured in order to simplify and standardize the management of data results.

There is an absolute need to expand the sample and collect quantitative data extending the questionnaires to a wider panel of interviewees to prove its reliability on a larger scale too.

Following a table in order to schematize the self-assessment of the whole work, maybe useful to next developments of this preliminary research.

| Strengths                  | Weaknesses                        | Next Operations                                      |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Topic (the way to approach it) | Amount of interviewees and data (too less) | Extending the sample numerically (€€€)                 |
| New Method (AGA System)   | Images selection (reliability)  | Deeper exploration about new criteria and principles to select/catalog the images, able to avoid selectors’ partiality |
| Some Findings E. G.:      | Questionnaire N. 1 (needed questions able to get more truthful answers) | Deeper exploration and more tests                     |
| 1- IFID (Increasing Factor Intellectually Driven) | Questionnaire N.2 difficulties to collect and manage data | Deeper exploration and more tests                     |
| 2- The “Neo-Social Functionalism” definition |                                                     |                                                      |
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About the Authors:

**Mario de Liguori** product designer, founder of Bottegadesign agency. Strategic designer for firms such as Illycaffè. Tenured teacher in school, has started research activity as PhD candidate at Politecnico di Milano in which leads teaching activities and workshops with international firms and research centres.

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