It is widely noticed that the world of “design” has come to occupy an increasingly central place in contemporary life. Schools and colleges that were once dedicated exclusively to the fine arts have all found renewed vigor by adding large and popular design departments, and the rhetoric of so called “design thinking” has moved beyond the trendy and into the commonplace. In such an environment, Jane Forsey’s *Aesthetics of Design* is a much welcome scholarly attempt to craft a philosophical approach to the designed world.

The work begins with a chapter devoted to just what counts as “design”. Forsey is less concerned with the activities and output of eclectic and celebrated professional designers, and much more interested in the often-anonymous quotidian objects that fill our daily lives (coffee pots, chairs, tools, computers and the like). Rather than seeking a way of unifying the various strands of the professional design world (interior design, fashion design, web-design, etc.), Forsey instead attempts to distinguishing design from other areas of potential aesthetic interest: art and craft. After a lengthy (and interesting) tour of the history of attempts to define these two things, she arrives at the following general definition: “design” is that which is “functional, immanent, mass-produced, and mute” (68). This provides an excellent distinction from fine art (which is often taken to be non-functional, transcendent, hand-made and generally about something), but isn’t quite so effective in distinguishing design from craft, since it seems the only real difference is the scale of production. This attempt to form clearer boundaries might well be helpful for practitioners of philosophical aesthetics, but those in the myriad, diverse, and overlapping worlds of art, design and craft (where hybridity and boundary-pushing are often prized) will likely find these divisions at best unhelpful and at worst misleading.

Having established her target, Forsey next seeks an appropriate weapon with which to shoot at it. This takes her through a brief history of one stream of the western aesthetic tradition. She provides an extremely lucid and familiar account here, describing the difficulties associated with both “subjective” and “objective” approaches to aesthetics, before coming to Kant’s theory as the only one that manages to navigate the correct path between these two failed alternatives. While this provides a highly readable introduction to the topic of aesthetics in general, this strategy creates a bit of a false dichotomy, and the way in which Forsey treats Kant’s work as the inevitable and sole solution to this “problem” is sure to frustrate anyone skeptical of Kant’s clean divisions between the true, the good and the beautiful.

However, in the third chapter, Forsey begins to apply Kant’s general theory to the world of design, and this is where the book is much more original. Rather than discussing the “pure” judgments of “free” beauty that have tended to dominate a great deal of the conversation surrounding Kant’s work,
Forsey concentrates on “applied” judgments of “dependent” beauty, which Kant himself admits are the sort we play the vast majority of the time. In such judgments, conceptual content and personal desire do indeed play a role, as opposed to pure judgments in which it makes no difference what we know about an object nor whether we have some form of desire for it. The key distinction between free and dependent beauty in Kant involves the notion of purpose (Zweck), as discussed in §16 of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Forsey considers at length the views of several major Kant scholars on this point, and hence from the original promise of an “aesthetics of design” we have moved into a quite technical debate surrounding a single section of Kant’s famous work. This is a development sure to delight Kant scholars but likely to frustrate and confound students of design and a more general readership.

Much of interest here resists simple summary, so I will make use of Forsey’s own illustration that ends this central argument of the book. Forsey makes a comparison between two similar espresso makers. Coffee pots are quintessential design objects on her definition: they are functional, immanent, mass-produced and surely not “about anything”. Now, in order to see their dependent beauty, we must be able to know their function (as opposed to when we look at art, in which purpose is irrelevant). In her illustration, one espresso maker is older, octagonal, and somewhat worn and corroded, while the other is cylindrical, new and has shiny brass knobs and handles. In debating them, one might say “even though the brass bits tend to burn my fingers, mine is still the better pot for it is much more elegant”. On the other hand, one could claim “even though mine is a little beat-up, it is still the better pot for it is much more efficient”. According to Forsey, these two claims are not as opposed as they seem, but are simply operating at different levels of analysis. The former claim is prioritizing a “pure” judgment (willing to sacrifice some function for more shinier form), while the latter is prioritizing an applied judgment (willing to sacrifice some formal style for more practical concerns). To Forsey, both are legitimate aesthetic claims about the beauty of the coffee pot, and in the world of design, the applied judgments of dependent beauty are what count the most. As a result, Forsey is quite happy to admit that the brass-knobbed pot is “better looking”, yet still claim the worn, plastic-handled version to be not only practically superior, but also aesthetically superior. With design, as opposed to art, we must look beyond mere appearance when making aesthetic judgments.

Yet I wonder how far such a position can go. Suppose we were to intentionally make Forsey’s worn pot even uglier: we might scratch and scorch it, melt some of its plastic, paint it in hideous colors or coat it in some slimy substance. At some point, it is absurd to claim that so ugly a coffee pot is simultaneously aesthetically superior based on its continued (superb) functionality. In her attempt to define “design” Forsey was interested in remaining faithful to ordinary ways of talking, but here it seems “aesthetic” has come to mean something quite far from common parlance if indeed an admittedly ugly object can simultaneously be a beautiful one. Surely we should want to instead say that such an object might indeed be very practical, efficient, and makes great coffee, but is not for those reasons beautiful. And, in the opposite direction, we should want to be able to say that such-and-such product is indeed more beautiful, but decidedly less functional. Consider, for instance, the many high-end, celebrated works of design that do not function as well as their more mundane, uglier counterpart. I take Forsey’s general point to be that there is a kind of beauty involved in something that works well, and this does indeed seem very plausible, but I’m not sure that applying a Kantian vocabulary so that we can call purely ugly but efficient things “dependently beautiful” really does much to clarify things, particularly if that vocabulary is then intended to cover the entire world of designed objects, from lingerie to airplanes.

Finally, Forsey discusses the relatively recent rise of “everyday aesthetics”. While applauding the general idea of expanding aesthetics beyond discussions of elite fine art, she remains very critical of approaches that depart too far from the Kantian tradition in which there must always be a clear distinction between aesthetic pleasures of judgment and those that arise merely through the body. For Forsey, sitting by a cheery fireplace or enjoying a warm bubble-bath just can’t count as aesthetic experiences, no matter how sensually pleasurable they might be, and treating them as such steps outside the bounds of legitimate debate. Her own work, which exploits Kant’s (traditional) conception of dependent beauty while at the same time addressing new domains of enquiry rooted in everyday experience, is presented as an exemplar of a theory that retains sufficient baby while jettisoning antiquated bathwater.
If one is comfortable with the broad strokes of the Kantian framework, then Forsey’s objections will seem entirely self-evident. But part of what the debates surrounding everyday aesthetics provide is precisely a challenge to this general Kantian framework. Rather than taking the study of aesthetics to involve only the experience of the beautiful and the sublime considered disinterestedly, many defenders of the emerging discourse are interested in returning to aesthetics as a much more general study of the extraordinary variety human sensory responses, such that pretty much all experiences (including bubble-baths) are aesthetic. Forsey’s adherence to the Kantian tradition prevents her from sufficiently evaluating her opponents’ position, though she certainly provides a clear defense of one side of the debate.

However, in the final analysis, the key strength of the book is not in its contribution to (or critique of) everyday aesthetics, nor even in its account of the still nebulous, sprawling and evolving world of “design”, but in its meticulous and considered application of Kant’s conception of dependent beauty. Kant scholars and amateurs alike will benefit from Forsey’s rigorous and articulate exploration of the role of function in our encounters with everyday life, and from the way that she has successfully contributed to a new domain of aesthetic enquiry.

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