

Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson

Functional Beauty.

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Functional beauty has been a sadly neglected topic in recent aesthetic theory. Parsons and Carlson seek to remedy this, arguing that it is an important aspect of aesthetic experience. However their purpose is much deeper than that: one could say that they are attempting a major revision of aesthetics itself, unifying it by placing functional beauty at its core. Carlson has long been a strong advocate for the aesthetics of nature and has promoted a well-known theory that natural phenomena are only appropriately appreciated from a base of scientific and common sense knowledge. He has also written more generally on environmental aesthetics, including the aesthetics of the built environment. Parsons, a younger colleague, has taken a similar position about the aesthetics of nature in his writings. Now they are teaming together to talk about the role of functional beauty in aesthetics as a whole.

The book is logically constructed with an opening chapter on the history of functional beauty followed by another on the role functional beauty plays in contemporary aesthetics, then two chapters that deal with possible problems for their theory, followed in turn by chapters that cover how functional beauty relates to nature, architecture, everyday aesthetics, and art. So far, I have followed convention by referring to functional beauty without capitalization. However, Parsons and Carlson constantly mention something called 'Functional Beauty'. Irritatingly, sometimes this term refers to their own theory (i.e. that objects have such aesthetic properties as 'fitness' and 'elegance' in light of our knowledge of their functions), sometimes to the concept of functional beauty, and sometimes to functional beauty itself. That aside, this is an excellently written book which makes several important points. I am particularly sympathetic to the authors' project of widening the domain of aesthetics beyond that of fine art and natural phenomena to include everyday life. However, within the domain of everyday aesthetics, I find the expansion too narrow since it is limited to utilitarian objects, and among these, to phenomena that can only be appreciated by eye and ear.

The opening chapter is noteworthy for drawing our attention to certain neglected aspects of the history of aesthetics. The idea of 'beauty as fitness for function' goes back to the ancient Greeks, notably to Socrates' identification of beauty with functional fit. In response to Socrates, someone might think that although some things may be beautiful because they are fit for their function, this is not the only source of beauty. Moreover some things seem to fit their function and are not beautiful at all. The authors avoid some of the problems with Socrates' position by transforming it into the idea that beauty is *looking* fit for function, the look being perceptually pleasing. (Socrates of course would hate this idea of giving primacy to appearance and pleasure.) The authors will also later insist, contra Socrates, that functional beauty is only one species of beauty. We also learn in this chapter about how such 18th century thinkers as Berkeley and Hume further

developed the notion of functional beauty, and how others criticized it. For example Burke claimed that a peacock is beautiful but not functionally so, and the pig's snout is not beautiful despite its functional excellence. Although the authors agree that fitness is not necessary for beauty, they disagree that it is not sufficient, arguing (following Alison's reply to Burke) that, although perhaps ugly overall, the pig's snout may contain an obscured beauty based on its fitness for function. The chapter ends with a discussion of Kant as the leading historical opponent to basing beauty on apparent fitness. Although Kant famously excluded ideas of purpose from his notion of pure beauty, he also brought it back in with his notion of dependent beauty. However the authors follow Paul Guyer in arguing that, for Kant, 'fitness for function' is present only as a constraint within dependent beauty.

The authors then skip to the 20th century when such writers as Edward Bullough, with his notion of aesthetic distance, and Jerome Stolnitz, with his ideas of aesthetic attitude and disinterestedness, continued the Kantian tradition. However, for various reasons, these ideas went into decline in the late 20th century. So why has there been no renewal of interest in functional beauty? One reason is that art continued to be the central concern of aesthetics. Another is that developments in aesthetics entailed a continued separation of the artworld from the everyday world where functional beauty is more prominent. Also, the alliance of the aesthetics of nature with natural science led to adopting science's suspicion of teleological concepts. The authors admit that the aesthetics of architecture talks about function at great length. However they observe, following Roger Scruton, that discussion of these ideas has generated two problems for the very idea of functional beauty. How does one determine what something's function is? How does one translate concern for function into something aesthetic? These problems, if not resolved, lead, they argue, to an unacceptable relativism. Indeed, they think that 'everyday aesthetics' has been neglected mainly because writers in this area have not yet developed clear criteria of evaluation, criteria that could be found through a turn to functionalism. They think that what they call 'rich cognitivism' has overcome this problem in the aesthetics of art and in the aesthetics of nature, and should also do so in the realm of everyday life. Since they believe that a better aesthetic theory is one that covers all forms of aesthetics as a unified discipline, they wish to use the idea of functional beauty to unify aesthetics of art, nature and everyday life.

This leads them, in their third chapter, to deal more explicitly with the problem of indeterminacy of the concept of function. Here, they reject the view that function should be defined in terms of human intention (which they regard as theoretically messy) and, inspired by Beth Preston, develop a notion of proper artifact function dependent on selection within the marketplace. Their formal account of this is: 'X has a proper function F if and only if Xs currently exist because, in the recent past, ancestors of X were successful in meeting some need or want in the marketplace because they performed F, leading to manufacture and distribution of Xs' (75). Yet, as they observe, some have argued that this approach would denude novel artifacts of any proper function. Their answer to this objection focuses on cases of extreme novelty. I would argue however that the problem is not that novel artifacts have no ancestors but that their proper function cannot be determined by reference to the way their ancestors met needs in the

marketplace. It would not be a bad thing if the theory could not handle *completely* novel artifacts, since there are none. It is more problematic if it cannot handle relatively novel artifacts, or recognize that the proper function of a relatively novel artifact is not the same as that of its ancestors. Moreover, the introduction of 'market success' fails to take into account that this is a relative matter: some items can be very successful in small markets (e.g. avant-garde art) but not in larger markets.

Whereas Preston's definition of artifact function inspires Parsons and Carlson's third chapter, Kendall Walton's theory of aesthetic appreciation of art based on categorizing non-aesthetic perceptual properties into standard, variable, and contra-standard, dominates the fourth. The authors use Walton's categories to classify several kinds of functional beauty. There is one kind in which there are variable features highly indicative of functionality and there are no contra-standard features (e.g., the muscle car). There is another in which the object has a high degree of perceptible properties that are standard for a functional category and it lacks contra-standard features. Most unusual is the authors' notion that something can have functional beauty if it has no contra-standard features but has certain variable features that seem to contradict the first.

Although the authors have some interesting things to say about the role of the appearance of fitness to function in appreciation of animals, landscapes, buildings, and art, I will limit my remaining comments to the application to everyday aesthetics. Here, the authors launch a criticism of a group of philosophers whom they call, appropriately enough, Deweyans. These include Carolyn Korsmeyer, Yuriko Saito, Arnold Berleant, Emily Brady, Richard Shusterman, and myself. Carlson and Parsons' main objection to Deweyans is that they allow mere bodily pleasures to be aesthetic. Defining these pleasures in terms of the proximal senses (e.g. smell and taste), Carlson and Parsons defend the traditional primacy of the distal senses, namely sight and hearing. (They admit the pleasures of the proximal senses as *adjuncts* to aesthetic experience proper.) Their argument appeals to linguistic usage, i.e. that we do not refer to the pleasure of a warm bath as aesthetic. I think we *do* sometimes refer to warm baths as aesthetic. Also, the point does not necessarily extend to other cultures, for example to the Japanese. In anticipation of this cross-cultural point Carlson and Parsons observe that the Turks and the Chinese have different words for aesthetic and bodily pleasures. Perhaps so, yet Turkish baths are famous for their aesthetic delights, and the Chinese have a word for gourmet food, *mei-shi*, which literally means "beautiful food."

My main problem with this approach to beauty is that it presents us with an insufficiently unified notion of beauty. It also depends on too narrow a notion of functionality. For Parson and Carlson the functional beauty of an object can be spoken of as somehow distinct from its beauty in general. The problem can be made concrete by looking at fashionable open-toed shoes. The authors take these as not having functional beauty because they do not serve the function of shoes which, they believe, is to cover the toes while walking. And yet, as the authors admit, the shoes may be strikingly beautiful. They think those who admire such shoes 'are not really considering the shoes in their actual functional category' (109) and that if they did so they would find that the shoes look ugly. Yet I would argue that the shoes' proper function in this case is the one they

display within the context of the world within which they work, i.e. in the world of fashion. The authors themselves say later that most items of clothing ‘possess important expressive or cultural functions as well’ (170). Although this is heading in the right direction it seems to contradict the earlier point. And, if expressive and cultural functions are allowed, why not decorative function too? While emphasizing utilitarian objects of everyday life the authors neglect objects that are mainly decorative. They also neglect experiences (for example, the experience of watching a child play insofar as it gives aesthetic pleasure), many of which are not functional at all. Similarly, the authors inform us that, in assessing the functional beauty of a chair, *how* it functions does not arise since all chairs operate on the same principles (93). Surely, how chairs function differs greatly based on cultural context, decorative aspects, and so forth.

Despite my disagreements I believe Parsons and Carlson admirably succeed in their stated goal of arguing for the importance of the look of functional fit in aesthetics. For this, and for the interesting issues raised, I believe this is a book that everyone interested in aesthetics should read. In their future writings I would like to know more about the relation between functional beauty and beauty generally. What is the extent of functional beauty’s domain: does it cover most of aesthetics or is it less ambitious than that? Is there, for example, room left for non-functional beauty? And if decoration serves a function then does it fall under functional beauty even though it is non-utilitarian?

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