Beauty in Design: From Aesthetic Value to Experiential Quality

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ABSTRACT
This paper suggests how beauty may relate to user experience, as an expression of the form and function of a product. The goal of providing a positive user experience intensifies as the environment of human activity is shaped by electronic, multifunctional products and services. Meanwhile, design and business authors extol the “beauty” of consumer products in enhancing one’s life: cars, furniture, even clothing. How can interaction designers engender beauty in user-friendly, interactive products? I offer ways of interpreting beauty as a quality of digital experience, citing aesthetic philosophies and examples.

Keywords
Beauty, user experience, aesthetics, interaction design

INTRODUCTION
Questioning the value of beauty in the experience of a digital product may seem odd, since beauty often pertains to art or nature, perhaps related to some Platonic ideal of perfection. However, the environment of human activity has been overrun by dissatisfying digital products with unhealthy ergonomics, ugly aesthetics or improper interfaces, suggesting a place for beauty in interaction design [6]. Recent writings confirm that qualities of experience and expression are key to a satisfying product and pleased user: Forlizzi and Ford describe a framework to achieve user experience goals in product design [2]. Pine and Gilmore offer a business rationale for meaningful experiences, as the next major economic offering [7]. These pieces suggest an arena for beauty as an emergent quality of user experience, beyond art and nature.

So, the heart of our problem is translating that evocative quality of aesthetic analog expression into digital consumer experience. In other words, how can designers “humanize technological expression”, support emotional needs and avoid alienating artifacts (e.g., a “data dump” of links or rude help agents) and ephemeral delights (e.g., trivial Flash animations) [3]? Designers should take responsibility to create interactions that feature a rewarding purpose and enduring quality—perhaps labeled as “beauty”. Else, we are left with users annoyed, bored, and unhappy—thus, diminishing the total “takeaway value”.

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES OF BEAUTY
To provide guidance I refer to two philosophies of aesthetic value. George Santayana and John Dewey were thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who studied aesthetics in relation to experience and expression, terms central to present design thinking. According to these authors, beauty occurs either as an act of projecting an emotion into an object or through the interactions of a conscious being with its environment [1,8].

Santayana’s The Sense of Beauty
Santayana looks into the origins and conditions of beauty as an “object of human experience” [8]. He deconstructs beauty into three successive parts—material, form, and expression—and declares that “beauty is a theory of values” [8] which originate in the emotional interest of the perceiver, arising from her immediate perception of an object's sensual properties. The benefit of beauty is to “synthesize the impulses of the self and achieve a singularity,” or a pleasing wholeness [8]. Unity is the guiding principle of making and perceiving so as to secure harmony and balance amidst chaotic, disorderly distractions. Beauty thus becomes “pleasure objectified”—a felt expression of unity that evokes “liberation of the self,” as part of the immaterial quality of experience [8].

Dewey’s Art as Experience
Dewey, however, focuses on the process of interaction between a person and her environment—the “sustaining or frustrating” conditions that define the activities of a person, such as the tools, spaces, materials, or other people [1]. Dewey shifts the emphasis of interaction from a reflexive communicative exchange towards an active relationship of growth and renewal. Every experience has a structure and pattern, found in a rhythmic “doing and undergoing” [1]. Dewey is especially concerned with recovering aesthetic experiences, which feature a dynamic integration of thought, action, and emotion into a consummating whole via working with an environment, or context. This comes from a process in which change over time yields a renewed
state of being, due to a rhythmic, orderly movement bound by a distinct beginning and end. Thus, an experience is a complete whole; it is enabled by a person’s active engagement that unfolds towards a fulfilling conclusion. Despite the parts, there is a single quality that unifies the variations—emotion [1].

Commonalities of Thought
Dewey and Santayana share a concern for what is immediate in human experience. The quality of that moment defines and develops the lasting value of an experience, whether it is the sensual properties of an object or the mutual dependence of action and intention. Emotion is one of the key ingredients of such an enlivening experience. There must be conscious awareness to yield emotional reaction in conjunction with sensual and mental responses [1,3,8].

BEAUTY IN ACTION
Using these philosophical ideas, we can identify examples of beauty in action.

Sony and Lifestyle Design
Sony’s approach to “lifestyle design” embodied by the famed Walkman™ is one path to beauty [5]. This is where the artifact operates within a certain aspect of one’s life, affecting behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions, thus exemplifying Dewey’s notion of experiential beauty [5]. A variety of concepts have featured unique materials, colors, and shapes for diverse markets. Such concepts, like the boldly masculine “Professional” model convey distinct voices, suggesting special arenas of use for consumers living different lives, like a fitness enthusiast or urban youth [5]. They are bound by the Sony approach to unify emotion with performance, a merging of sensual beauty and functional power, to achieve a pleasing artifact and user experience [5]. Former head of The Sony Design Center, Nobuyuki Idei, has said, “The design should draw our hand, create a fire in the mind and make us smile as we pick it up” [5]. This is akin to Dewey’s idea of an evocative engagement that resonates with the self and renews perceptions and behaviors throughout an activity, within a context.

Apple and Machine Beauty
For computer scientist David Gelernter, “machine beauty”—the union of power and simplicity in innovation—is key to developing software that helps users “break free” from the confines of a machine’s internal logic towards a “creative symbiosis” between the user and her activity [4]. A loss of awareness of the structure and mechanics results, leading to a direct engagement of the material, akin to Santayana’s “illusion of disembodiment” and singular unity of being [8].

One example is the original Apple Macintosh™ interface. Gelernter extols the “disciplined visual richness” of the desktop metaphor with an abstract yet functional icon system to easily afford tasks like writing, playing, or reading [4]. Likewise, the Apple Pro Mouse™ has an elegant, useful form—a single uniform shell that is the sole button for interacting with the interface. The shell bears a responsive fit to the user’s hand, with a deft pivot action that affords a satisfying transparency of use [3].

CONCLUSION
I have outlined viewpoints and examples of beauty to help designers define user experience in terms of legitimate, positive aesthetic values. The language of Dewey and Santayana, as reflected in the examples, reveal how user-centered processes may incorporate such thinking in creating products whose interactive potential moves a person emotionally and physically to yield a memorable moment worth re-living and sharing. There are other issues to consider: How can we predict or measure emotional response? How can we intuit heuristics for ostensibly “beautiful” designs? Cognitive studies into attention and attraction and metrics of experiential quality may also help in pursuing “beauty in design”.

REFERENCES

* Sony Walkman is a trademark of Sony Corporation. Apple Macintosh and Apple Pro Mouse are trademarks of Apple Computer, Inc.