

« A Role That Functional Beauty Does *Not* Occupy in our Aesthetic Experience »

In *Functional Beauty*, Parsons and Carlson (henceforth P&C) introduce the notion of Functional Beauty (henceforth FB)¹ to develop a sort of aesthetic appreciation “that accords a *central* role to [the knowledge of] function” (2008, p.228. my emphasis).

I begin by introducing P&C’s claim. Then I evaluate whether it is true that, as they suggest, FB is always the most important component in our aesthetic appreciation of an object. By means of a few examples, I show that this is not the case, i.e. that there are cases in which the overall aesthetic character of an object is not influenced more by our appreciation of its fitness for function² than by its “immediate” sensory properties. I conclude that P&C are wrong in suggesting that FB occupies a central and primary place (the most important one) in *all* of our aesthetic experiences.

P&C’s aesthetic theory begins as a compromise between the denial of any aesthetic role for function and the radical claim that beauty *is* function. P&C endorse a weak version of FB saying that the knowledge of an object’s fitness for function is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for ascribing beauty to it (2008, pp.228-229).

However, they also claim that judgements according a role to the object’s function tell us something *more substantial* and *central* about the overall aesthetic achievement of the work, its appreciation, and evaluation, than the judgements based on sensory appearance alone (cf. 2008, p.233). They say that the proper function of an object plays a “*key explanatory role*”, such that to grasp the function is to grasp “something fundamental about the object”. For them, the appreciation of the apparent fitness of an object “captures something *more significant* about the aesthetic character of that object” than does appreciation of its pattern, colour or any other sensory apparent feature (2008, p.234. my emphasis). By holding this, P&C go beyond the modest claim that FB occupies

¹ P&C use the term “beauty” to mean “aesthetic appeal in general”. Therefore, FB means “aesthetic appreciation [in a wide sense] involving knowledge that concerns function”(cf. P&C 2008, pp.xii-xiii).

² By fitness for function I mean “how well” an object fulfils its function.

a place in our (rich) aesthetic experience. What they suggest³ is that “FB occupies a central and primary place in all of our aesthetic experience” (p.234).

It is hard to assess the strength of this claim. However, since P&C say that FB occupies a “primary place” (and it is hard to see how two “kinds” of beauty can share this “primary place”), I interpret them as suggesting that FB is of prime importance (i.e. more important than other kinds of beauty) for the whole (“all”) of our experience of the aesthetic character of functional objects.

I think that we ought to resist such a suggestion by saying that the prime importance of FB for critical evaluation of artworks (supposing one acknowledges it) does not entail the prime importance of FB in all of our aesthetic experiences⁴. I explain this by using a table.

³ They do so very prudently. Note the conditional “may” and the series of “it seems” on pp. 232-4 (2008).

⁴ P&C appeal on pp. 233-4 to the fact that aesthetic judgements are more significant when they are based on an understanding of the object of appreciation. One could agree with this, but deny that one needs to understand artworks’ functions, because one denies that art per se has a function. I owe this remark to Berys Gaut.

The aesthetic experience of an object appearing as $X \cap Y$, for P&C, would be⁵:

Y \ X	Fit for function	→	Unfit for function	Unknown fitness
Immediately pleasing	Aesthetically pleasing		Aesthetically unpleasing (?)	Aesthetically pleasing
↓				
Immediately unpleasing	Aesthetically pleasing (?)		Aesthetically unpleasing	Aesthetically unpleasing
No sensory appearance	Aesthetically pleasing (?)		Aesthetically unpleasing (?)	Impossible judgement

In the case of objects that are fit for function and immediately unpleasing, for P&C, the overall aesthetic experience follows from the quality of the FB. However, there are aesthetic experiences in which the immediate sensory unpleasantness dominates beauty arising from function. Consider as example some manure that has a nasty colour, appearance and smell, but is perfectly fit for its function (fertilize fields) and thus Functionally Beautiful. Imagine an insect that is perceptually displeasing by the very fact of being Functionally Beautiful, i.e. of being fit for its biological function of keeping predators at distance. Our overall aesthetic experience of the manure or the insect seems *not* to follow more from their fitness for function (FB) than from their immediate sensory properties: normally we would consider them aesthetically unpleasing rather than pleasing.

A similar suggestion applies also to the case of objects that are unfit for function, but immediately pleasing. The overall pleasing aesthetic experience of a tourist seeing the flooded Piazza S.Marco in Venice suggests that there are cases where FB (in this case, the

⁵ This table is an explanatory tool. I stipulate an ideal case in which an object can only fall in “absolute” clear-cut categories such as “fit for function”, and so on. This does not affect my conclusion.

lack of **FB** *qua* town square) does not have the most important role in affecting one's aesthetic experience.

These examples show that P&C's suggestion does not account correctly for our aesthetic experiences of all objects. It might be that **FB** plays a role in our aesthetic experience, but it does not follow that **FB** occupies the most important place in all of our aesthetic experience. P&C are not directly harmed by this outcome, since they adopted the cautious approach of suggesting the "absolute" importance of **FB** without committing themselves to claim it is so. Nonetheless, I have shown that P&C's final suggestion overstates the importance of **FB** for our aesthetic experience, and - therefore - that this suggestion should not even be smuggled.

References

Parsons, Glenn; Carlson, Allen (2008): *Functional Beauty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.