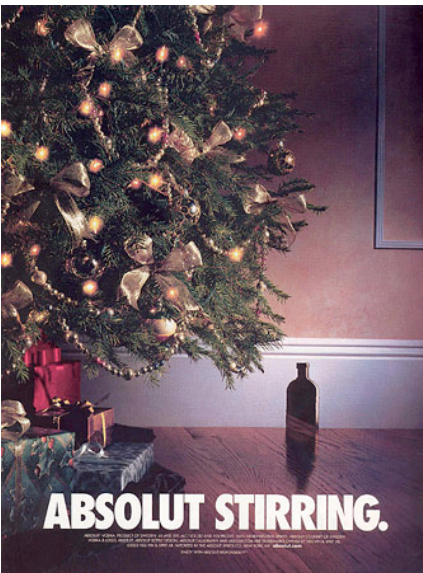


# GR M10 Module 2: Should Design be Beautiful?



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“From airport terminals decorated like Starbucks to the popularity of hair dye among teenage boys, one thing is clear: we have entered the Age of Aesthetics. Sensory appeals are everywhere, and they are intensifying, radically changing how Americans live and work...Aesthetic pleasure taps deep human instincts and is essential for creativity and growth.”

Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness*

“The fact that I don’t make any distinction between “beautiful” and “ugly” always keeps me pushing to get somewhere new and surprise myself.”

James Victore

## INTRODUCTION

People respond emotionally and intellectually to visual images, often recognizing characteristics that make a something seem beautiful without even thinking about it. We refer to this reaction as an aesthetic response.

Many see beauty in the natural world. (1) Some people respond to certain subjects because they associate them with pleasure, such as the Christmas theme in the Absolut Vodka Ad. (2) Others may find a particular combination of lines, colors, and shapes appealing without understanding the intended message, such as the rainbow composition at the UCLA Extension Spring 05 catalog cover designed by Rebecca Méndez (3)

This Module will focus on the following questions: Why do we see certain design products as beautiful? What is the difference between the aesthetics and the taste? Is beauty a property of things, or is it historically, culturally and stylistically conditioned? Is beauty always in the eyes of the beholder? What is the difference between “beautiful” and “pretty”?

## AESTHETIC RESPONSES

### Why do we see certain design products as beautiful?

Aesthetic responses may be personal and linked to emotions. Seeing a sunset may give us an increased heart rate or widened eyes. What exactly is aesthetically pleasing to an individual depends on his or her life experiences. The culture you live in, the events you have witnessed, your interactions with others - in short your life - continually shapes your aesthetic responses. This concept is learned - as we develop mentally and socially, we are taught that shapes and colors arranged in particular way are beautiful. We also are taught which arrangements are ugly. Our primary concepts of aesthetics are formed early in our development, often without us being aware of what is occurring. Everyone’s life is as unique as their DNA - and so are



(4)

aesthetic responses.

Aesthetic judgments may be culturally conditioned and may vary from culture to culture and individuals often have different ideas about what makes design beautiful. The common ground which forms our aesthetic principles is the culture we live in. You can't escape your geographic location, and that plays a large role in what aesthetic values you are taught. Again, common culture creates a tendency for individuals to have similar life experiences within that culture.

Modern aestheticians have asserted that aesthetic judgments might be based on the senses, emotions, intellectual opinions, will, desires, culture, preferences, values, subconscious behavior, conscious decision, training, instinct, sociological institutions, or some complex combination of these, depending on exactly which theory one employs. Aesthetic judgments seem to often be at least partly intellectual and interpretative. It is what a thing means or symbolizes for us that we are judging.

## AESTHETICS AND TASTE

### What is the difference between the aesthetics and taste?

Viewer interpretations of beauty possess two concepts of value: aesthetics and taste. Aesthetics is the philosophical notion of beauty. According to Kant beauty is objective and universal; thus certain things are beautiful to everyone. Taste is a result of education and awareness of cultural values; therefore taste can be learned. Taste varies according to class, cultural background, and education.

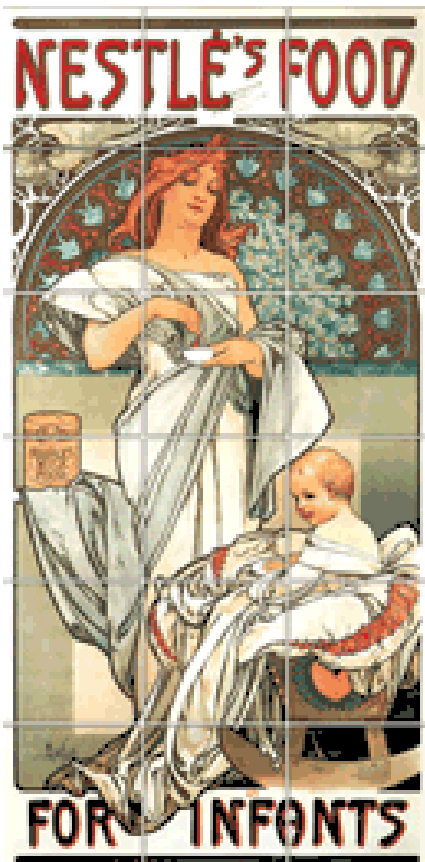
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has claimed that individual tastes and preferences are socially produced. According to Bourdieu, people aspire towards "higher" cultural forms – they want to be associated with those who are considered to be more developed intellectually and artistically and therefore tend to consume corresponding cultural products. We might judge a Hummer to be beautiful partly because it is desirable as a status symbol, or we might judge it to be repulsive partly because it signifies for us over-consumption and offends our political or moral values.

Bad taste is a label given to any object or idea that does not fall within the normal social standards of the time or area. Varying from society to society and from time to time, bad taste is generally thought of as a negative thing. Some artists deliberately create vulgar or kitsch works of art to defy critical standards or social norms. Director John Waters, self-confessed king of all things tasteless and tacky, enjoys shocking audiences and mocking the movie world. Divine in John Waters' "Pink Flamingo"(4)

## DESIGN AESTHETICS

### Have the ideas about the beauty in design changed in the course of history?

Greek philosophers initially felt that aesthetically appealing objects were beautiful in and of themselves. Plato felt that beautiful objects incorporated proportion, harmony, and unity among their parts. Similarly, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle found that the universal elements of beauty were order, symmetry, and definiteness. In the 1700s and 1800s, European philosophers and art schools developed rules to analyze compositional elements such as balance, unity, rhythm, and harmony and create beautiful works of art. By understanding and following these rules, artists could learn to produce beautiful artworks that many so-called untrained artists could not. Every art movement in history has its own esthetics. Here are some examples;



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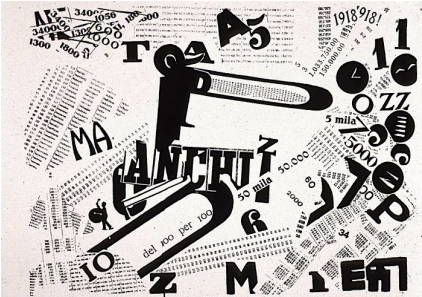
## ART NOUVEAU:

Until the turn of the Twentieth Century beauty has been emphasized as the key component of the aesthetic experience, and anything that wasn't trying to be beautiful couldn't count as art. ART NOUVEAU style has emerged in architecture, furniture, fashion and graphic design about 1890, and was an important catalyst in setting aside 19th century historicism and contributed to the development of early concepts of modernism.

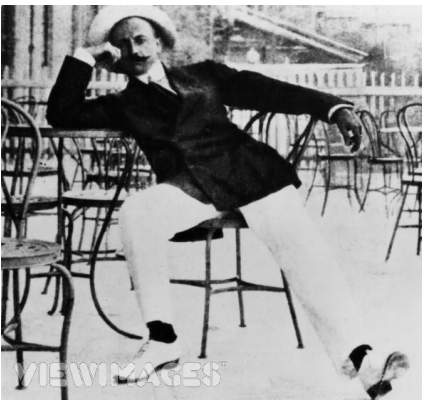
Source inspiration: Arts and Crafts Movement, the Pre-Raphaelites, Celtic Ornament and Japanese woodcut prints.

Techniques: Abstraction, organic fluidity, floral motifs, asymmetrical typographic style, ornate forms of typeface

Example: Alphonse Mucha: Nestle ad (5)



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## FUTURISM:

By the early 1900s, many of the key inventions which were to become fundamental to life in the new century were becoming available to the everyday consumer: electric lighting, domestic appliances, telephone, gramophone, cinema and the automobile. Revolutionary art movement founded in 1909 by Italian writer and poet T.F. Marinetti. was the most vocal in their recognition of the importance of reconciling design thinking with the realities of mass production technology.. Conceived as a literary movement, it subsequently embraced all the arts including painting, sculpture, music and architecture.

Source inspiration: Futurists rejected Italy's cultural past in favour of new advances in science and technology. The concept of change was the key concept in their activities and ideology.

Techniques: Futurism encouraged the emergence of the typographer/poet, challenging the tradition of the printed page and the predictable sequence of typographic information. Type elements and collage were used in a dynamic manner to create picture-poems.

Example: T.F. Marinetti : Words in Liberty (6)(7)

## BAUHAUS

A growing belief in early twentieth-century avant-garde design circles was that design needs to be cleaned of ornamental embellishment in order to be in tune with the "spirit of the age". This belief was the foundation of the Modern Movement in design. The Bauhaus was a German design school - the most important educational institution underpinning the development of the Modern Movement.

Source inspiration: The economic implications of standardization and mass-production technology, a new unity between art and industry by rejecting any division between decorative and constructional techniques.

Techniques: Clean, geometric forms, restrained use of color with the emphasis on white, grey and black, and sans serif typography.

Example: Bauhaus magazine cover 1923 (8)



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## POPULUX - RAYMOND LOEWY

In the period between 1951-1964 in the United States, the power of technology was perceived in its' ability to create exciting new products for mass consumption. During this period the American advertising began to pay greater attention to possibilities offered by an understanding of consumer psychology, shortening the cycle of consumption through the emphasis on the fashionability of everyday goods.

Source inspiration: "Consumer engineering", "Good design is an upward sales curve". "Mythical picture of himself as an individual who altered single-handedly the visible form of the material environment of North America" Jonathan M. Woodham about Raymond Loewy.

Techniques: Raymond Loewy was responsible for the design of almost every conceivable product type, from cigarette packs to streamlined steam trains. He explored the ideas for the form and appearance on the clay models, and transformed many generic household products into the elegant, efficient looking, modern products with the styled, modern streamlined form.

Example: Raymond Loewy surrounded by some of his designs: Cover of Time magazine (1949) (9)



(10)

## THE CASE FOR "UGLY" THINKING IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN - JAMES VICTORE

Contemporary designers often want viewers to think about design in a different way, beyond the traditional rules of beauty. For many, it is more important that the works are interesting, thought-provoking, and challenging.

Source inspiration: "The visual artist that inspires me most these days is English graffiti artist Banksy. His work doesn't seek approval. It is fearless, attractive, smart, and funny - everything I want in my work", "Maybe I am a dreamer. I still believe that design can change the world". J. Victore

Techniques: Strong graphic concepts, visual wit, and bold, often aggressive imagery. "My objective - with every job - is to try to take it where no one else would ever go".

Example: James Victore: Columbus Day poster(10)

## CASE STUDY

Peterson, Milla, Hooks: Target "Sign of the Times" Spring 2000 TV ad (11) (12)

### BACKGROUND:

In Target's print and TV ad campaigns, ordinary objects and familiar consumer brands become icons of hip consumer paradise. It all began with the campaign "Sign of Times," launched by the ad agency Peterson, Milla, Hooks. The agency saw Target's bull-eye logo as a simple, powerful form that could define the store's advertising. In the campaign, the symbol overtakes every conceivable surface, from wallpaper and clothing to the eye of a bull terrier.

### CONCEPT:

This ad converts a suburban backyard into a red a white stage where sleek, bottle-blond models pose as members of a simulated family. The grass is red. A little boy kicks a red ball through the red circle of a garden hose, the objects forming a giant target. Nobody in this montage is touching, or even looking at one another. What holds



(11)

their world together is the brand. This ad pokes fun at the idealized American marketing images of the 1950s and 1960s, whose depictions of happy families enjoying the mass-produced bounty of consumerism were equally false, but without the sense of irony.



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## AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

### 1. Values

“Aesthetically, we all like Target better, but their wages are in many places low or just as low, and they all represent the Wal-Martization of our economy, which is the exchange of low prices for poor work conditions.”

Liza Featherstone, *The Trouble with Wal-Mart: An interview with Liza Featherstone*

### 2. Emotions

I love Target. I love the store, I love the products, I love the stock.

“This desire “aesthetic pleasure” has given us “designer” toilet brushes, “designer” kitchen gadgets, even “designer” (sized-to-fit, no less) condoms. These products flaunt their utter designer-ness. And now, we have this “designer” department store: Target.”

### 3. Intellectual opinions

Target is now a veritable mass market designer hothouse, with items from Michael Graves, Mossimo, Isaac Mizrahi, Amy Coe and Cynthia Rowley. However, they discontinued their Phillippe Starck line. Karim Rashid told me that it was a financial disaster. Which got me thinking: Is Target only committed to profitable design ventures? Should they be offering more “risky” design options if they are truly committed to design? Are they “mainstreaming” design? Are they commodifying design? Could they be “dumbing down” design? Could this be designer manipulation? And does that matter? Should this be something that bothers us?

## SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION: People respond emotionally and intellectually to visual images, often recognizing characteristics that make a something seem beautiful without even thinking about it. We refer to this reaction as an aesthetic response.

**AESTHETIC RESPONSES:** Aesthetic responses may be personal and linked to emotions. Seeing a sunset may give us an increased heart rate or widened eyes. Aesthetic judgments may be culturally conditioned and may vary from culture to culture. Modern aestheticians have asserted that aesthetic judgments might be based on the senses, emotions, intellectual opinions, will, desires, culture, preferences, values, subconscious behavior, conscious decision, training, instinct, sociological institutions, or some complex combination of these, depending on exactly which theory one employs.

**AESTHETICS AND TASTE:** Viewer interpretations of beauty possess two concepts of value: aesthetics and taste. Aesthetics is the philosophical notion of beauty. Taste is a result of education and awareness of cultural values; therefore taste can be learned.

**DESIGN AESTHETICS:** Five examples of how the ideas about the beauty in design changed in the course of history.

**CASE STUDY:** Peterson, Milla, Hooks: Target “Sign of the Times” Spring 2000 TV ad

## **EXERCISE: Should Design be Beautiful?**

In this exercise, you will explore your own ideas about what makes a work of graphic design beautiful.

1. Select one of the images from the:

[http://redsparrow.org/gr10/week2/in\\_mainframeT2.php](http://redsparrow.org/gr10/week2/in_mainframeT2.php)

gallery that you see as the most beautiful, and the other one that you see as the least beautiful example of graphic design. I invite you to provide your own examples as well.

*“When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.”*  
*Buckminster Fuller*

2. Analyze both examples following the CASE STUDY template from the Module Two. Explain the background, concept, and give your aesthetic judgement. (Your aesthetic judgement could be based on your senses, emotions, intellectual opinions, will, desires, culture, preferences, values, subconscious behavior, conscious decision, training, instinct, sociological institutions.....)

3. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” What does this saying mean? How does it apply to the question “What is Graphic Design?”

- Do you believe aesthetics to be personal, or do you think people with similar views and beliefs will agree that something is aesthetically pleasing?

- Is beauty always in the eye of the beholder?

- What do you think about Pierre Bourdieu’s thoughts about the distinction between the aesthetics and taste?

4. Write your response and upload it to the Discussions: Module Two: Should Design be Beautiful?

5. Read at least thirty other students’ responses and comment at least two of them. Keep the discussion about your post going. The most active discussion gets 5 additional points.