
Book Review

GLENN PARSON and ALLEN CARLSON. *Functional Beauty*. Oxford University Press 2008, 240 pp., \$75 hardcover.

Reviewed by Andrea Nolen

The current state of aesthetic theory is fragmented: the discipline needs a unifying theory that allows nature, art and every-day objects to be evaluated under the same aesthetic principles. To achieve this unification the authors propose a theory based on *functional beauty*.

Functional beauty is a quality belonging to an object: something is functionally beautiful when the characteristics that make it beautiful also contribute to its function. An example would be a bridge that is strengthened by its perfectly-proportioned arch. However, there are two problems with evaluating functional beauty. First, how does one decide what is the proper function of an object? Second, how does “looking fit” for a purpose translate into the physical world?

Parsons and Carlson answer both questions with their *theory of selected effects*, which is based on functional beauty. The idea is simple: the proper function of an object is whatever function resulted in that object being reproduced or preserved by the marketplace. Selected effects theory attempts to use market forces to eliminate the relativity inherent in any individual's judgment about function. This theory gives no special weight to the intentions of the object's creator, but democratizes function. An artifact's proper function is the reason people are willing to buy it.

According to their theory, after the marketplace has voted on proper function, the object can be categorized by type. Every type has certain physical characteristics associated with it. These physical characteristics are in turn evaluated according to three aesthetic qualities: simplicity/elegance; “looking fit”; and “visual tension”. In sum, the theory of selected effects recommends a three-step process for evaluating the functional beauty of an object: look to the market for the object's proper function; categorize the object based on that function and evaluate the aesthetic effect of its physical characteristics using the three qualities described above.

Parsons and Carlson believe selected effects theory provides a unifying principle for evaluating our experience of art, nature and even every-day objects. However, the theory only provides a unifying principle for aesthetic phenomenon as far as the market selects for functionality. Some scholars, such as George Akerlof in *The Market for Lemons* (1970) have argued that market forces do not always select for functionality. In fact, function often loses out to profit: consumer choice may be thwarted by what a few companies decide to make; or cash-strapped consumers may demand a cheaper, poorly-functioning product.

The corruptibility of market forces does *not* mean that the theory of selected effects has no merit; it just doesn't have the inflexibility of Natural Selection. Aesthetics is not a natural science – it is the study of human experience. A meaningful theory of aesthetics will never be as “tidy” as evolution. By striving for the strictness of a natural science the authors have focused on one special instance in market theory: where buyers can shape what is offered. If the masses come to a decision about function based on price, then at best, their choice

approximates proper function. A proxy for proper function is still better than leaving function mired in relativity; especially if it helps unify a fragmented discipline.

Carlson and Parsons show how selected effects theory can explain beauty in common objects, nature and the high arts. For all of these groups, beauty is found in understanding how the thing plays its role in a greater system. For art and every-day artifacts, that system is human life; for animals and the environment it is the natural order. Selected effects theory does provide unity to these experiences along with some fantastic insights. Moreover, selected effects theory illuminates a division between different types of beauty in the natural world: the beauty of living things and the beauty of the inorganic.

In living nature, natural selection assigns function instead of the marketplace. In order to correctly apply selected effects theory to a living thing it is necessary to recognize that the organism has “plans, priorities and projects” of its own. Living things can become ugly when they don’t function in the natural system – for example, the ugliness of a malformed wing. Non-living natural things cannot be ugly because they never fail in their function.

Non-living nature is not shaped by natural selection and is never purposefully assigned function. Instead, inorganic things have causal role functions- they play a role in a larger system but only a circumstantial one. A rock diverting a river has a causal role function, but once it crumbles and the river moves, that function is lost. The crumbled rock has lost its circumstantial function, but it does not become ugly. Selected effects theory agrees with Positive Aesthetics (the thesis that virgin nature is always good) as far as the beauty of inorganic objects.

Carlson and Parsons’ theory best describes the aesthetic of every-day objects: a market-based view of function lends itself to appreciating commodities. What is surprising about their analysis is that they stand by the traditional view that the “distal” senses (sight and hearing) are more apt for aesthetic experiences than the body-based “proximal” senses (touch, taste, smell). The authors make the case that functional beauty is applicable to architecture too – with the proviso that the market governs preservation of buildings as well. Ruins present an interesting challenge to their theory, which they explain in terms of charm: ruins express ideas of the passage of time, power of nature, the sublime

The aesthetics of high art is less easily analyzed than that of everyday things. Selected effects theory presupposes that artifacts have *ancestors*, the fitness of which contributed to the object being preserved. However, truly unique objects have no ancestors. The authors believe that some modern works cannot be assigned function because they are unique. In these cases it will be up to Art History to decide if the pieces are functionally beautiful.

In short, *Functional Beauty* provides a brief overview of aesthetic thought since Socrates and is accessible to students new to the subject. The book also has interdisciplinary appeal drawing from both Biology and Economics. It is therefore recommended for both philosophy and other courses that relate to environmental aesthetics and would be appropriate for an introductory level course as well.

ANDREA NOLEN
Independent Scholar
W6838 Smock Valley Road
Monroe, WI 53566

EMAIL: crandall_andrea@hotmail.com