9

Consumption, Reception, Taste

In the main, design historians have focused upon aspects of production – designers, designing, manufacture – and the analysis of products rather than upon an equally crucial dimension – the role of users and consumers. I am including a brief discussion of consumption, reception and taste to correct this imbalance.

So far there is not one comprehensive text dealing with design and consumerism. Anyone proposing to research this subject would need to refer to a wide range of literature touching upon its various facets. For example, writings by political economists about the nature of goods/commodities and their relation to human needs; economic and cultural histories of affluent societies; studies of the mass media and advertising; histories of shops and shopping; publications about leisure and tourism; material on consumer rights and consumer associations; analyses of lifestyles. The challenge would be to bring all these strands together while still keeping design as the central theme.

Given the magnitude and the disparate nature of the literature about consumption and consumerism, a summary will not be attempted. It is also assumed that the arguments for and against the consumer society are familiar, so they will not be rehearsed here. The problem for the design historian with existing publications on consumption is one of specificity. There are numerous highly informative books and articles, for instance, about advertising – semiotic and ideological critiques abound – but since a large proportion of them have been written by sociologists, media and communication theorists, the role played by design tends to be given short shrift. Of course, there are books by designers who have worked in advertising agencies which discuss the design process, but these suffer from the opposite fault: they are weak on history, socioeconomic context and theoretical understanding.

Consumption

Compared to 'customer' or 'user' the word 'consumer' has slightly pejorative connotations. To consume food is to appropriate it and use it up. In the process the food is destroyed or at least broken down and, once the goodness has been extracted via digestion, there are waste products. Similar processes are at work in consumer societies: goods are acquired, used, adapted and, when worn out or obsolete, thrown away. No precise date for the birth of consumer societies first in America and then Europe can be given because they evolved over several centuries. (In Britain most people think of the present consumer society as dating from the 1950s and 1960s.) Even so, their main features are clear: industrial manufacture, mass production methods; a capitalist, free-market economy; a reasonably affluent population with disposable income; developed systems of distribution, marketing, advertising/mass media, retailing, mail order and hire purchase; an incredible number and variety of products, appliances and services from which to make a choice. (One critic has referred to 'the misery of choice' in a consumer society.)

Design historians need to pay attention to consumerism because design plays a vital role within it. Design can improve the functionality of consumer durables (the constant redesign of products can also make them worse), but it is also a means of creating differences between basically similar goods. New inventions and redesigns are essential to the dynamic of consumerism: they create new needs, new desires, dissatisfaction with what already exists via the mechanism of psychological obsolescence.

Exactly what takes place when people consume or use designed goods or environments will be considered shortly under the heading of 'Reception'. The fact that consumers vary in terms of the desires and preferences they bring to the marketplace will be discussed in the section on 'Taste'. But first a word about shops and advertising.

Before consumption proper can take place people have to be informed what products exist and where to acquire them. In other words, between manufacturers and consumers are the

realms of distribution, marketing, advertising, mail order, shops and shopping. Although all these topics are closely related both logically and in daily life, writers tend to treat them in isolation. Even single topics are subject to fragmentation. Shops, for instance, have been discussed as part of the history of business, as part of the history of interior design and display, and as part of the history of architecture. This is unfortunate given the fact that in today's department stores, supermarkets, shopping centres and malls, a total shopping experience, a spectacle of consumption, is offered which brings into play environmental and interior design, narrative themes, commodities, credit cards and entertainment. A 1987 television programme about the huge American shopping malls and the people addicted to them was more effective in describing this phenomenon - because it was visual, because it considered the mall as a totality and because it showed it in operation - than a purely architectural analysis of the buildings.[1] Walter Benjamin's lyrical accounts of nineteenth-century Parisian shopping arcades anticipated the work of these programme makers.[2]

Shops are significant places because they are where use-values are translated into exchange-values, where consumer goods are exchanged for money, that is, become commodities. Since shops and stores compete with one another, design is an important means of increasing their appeal to customers and differentiating themselves from rivals. Customers do not, of course, buy a shop's interior decor and display style, but these factors are part of a shop's 'image', part of the shopping experience, and customers certainly 'buy' this 'image' along with the goods they purchase.

Differently styled goods require differently styled display settings. If the context is inappropriate and unsympathetic, the goods will seem out of place; they may not reach their intended audience either. It was precisely dissatisfaction with the places and manner in which his furniture designs were displayed which encouraged the young Terence Conran to establish his own retailing outlets: the Habitat chain of stores, a detailed account of which is given by Barty Phillips in *The Habitat Story* (1984).

Because of their large purchasing power, chainstores are in a position to influence manufacturers, to insist on good quality

materials, higher standards of workmanship, uniformity of production, and to determine the design of the goods they order. As Goronwy Rees explains in his history of Marks & Spencer – *St Michael* (1969) – this was one of the policies which contributed to the remarkable success of the British chainstore.

Huge department stores were an urban phenomenon of the mid and late nineteenth century. They marked an important stage in the modernization of consumption and retailing. Essentially they were business enterprises created by and for the bourgeoisie. Histories of Bon Marché in Paris and Harrods in London make clear the close fit between the goods and services provided by the stores and the lifestyles of their middle-class clientele. In a sense such emporia were the engines of the consumer culture we know today.[3]

Consumption is so closely associated with the purchase of commodities from shops by private individuals that there is a danger of overlooking the fact that, as citizens, everyone uses or is affected by design decisions taken in the public realm – such things as town planning, the design of public utilities and buildings, highways and rail systems, military establishments and equipment, hospital and welfare services. In these fields the consumers' spending power can have an influence but to achieve change they may also need to resort to pressure groups and the political process. In advanced countries campaigning by both pressure groups and politicians is now a process which increasingly depends upon the skills of the designer.

Advertising plays a crucial role in consumerism by mediating between manufacturers, retailers and the public. Like shops, advertisements provide goods with a context (usually mythical) and with an image (generally glamorous) which the viewer may not be able to discount. The vehicle of presentation is also vital: the adverts in a glossy women's magazine, for instance, are imbricated in its general look and ethos. Editorial matter and adverts make a totality which offers readers a specific lifestyle. Janice Winship has undertaken a critique of the British magazine *Options*, launched in 1981, which, she concludes, presents a particular fantasy-model for its readers to emulate which she calls 'Superwoman'.[4] It is significant that the title of this

magazine pays homage to the central notion of consumerist ideology – choice.

Visual advertisements are particularly rich objects of study for design historians because not only do they promote and depict designed goods but are themselves instances of design. As aids to selling they can be analysed in terms of their commercial function but as visual signs they can be analysed in terms of their iconography, pictorial rhetoric and aesthetic appeal. Of greatest value to design history are those theorizations which attempt to synthesize these modes of analysis, as in the 'commodity aesthetics' approach developed by the German neo-Marxist writer Wolfgang Haug.[5]

Reception Theory/History

Reception aesthetics dates from the late 1960s. It was developed principally in relation to literature when theorists became interested in the subjective responses of readers, in the multiplicity of readings texts generated, and in the part played in the contemporary experience of a work of art of knowledge of past interpretations. Mainly German scholars were involved: H. R. Jauss, B. Zimmermann, H. Link, G. Grimm, W. Faulstich and W. Iser.[6] This is not to say that the approach was unknown in the visual arts. However, the difference between art and literary criticism is that the theoretical and methodological problems of reception were more explicit and developed in the latter than in the former.

Some theorists make a distinction between reception and impact studies: reception describes the initial phase of assimilation, while impact refers to the effects which follow. Reception theory challenges the autonomy of texts, and by implication designed goods, by arguing that interpretations and evaluations are determined not only by the nature of the texts and goods themselves but also by the character of the receiver or consumer. Readers of Marx will recall he once observed that goods obtain their 'last finish' in consumption.

Empirical studies of psychological responses to works of art and sociological studies of the audience for art have, of course, been undertaken for many years, but reception theory is a

significantly different approach. Reception theorists are willing to make use of the findings of such empirical research but they also consider the wider social processes, institutions, contexts and structures which condition and limit the responses of viewers.

One error which reception theorists have been keen to avoid is the 'affective fallacy' identified by the literary critics W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in the 1940s: that is, treating the psychological processes of viewers under the impact of a work of art as the work itself. If this happened the history of art would be replaced by the history of art appreciation. Wimsatt and Beardsley's position is that a work has a material existence external to the viewer which structures the viewer's response. Furthermore, a work cannot be equated with just one person's response because its meaning and significance is objective in the sense of being an intersubjective phenomenon. The challenge facing the theorist is to comprehend the interaction between work and viewers, the dialectical relationship between object and subjects, without losing sight of either polarity.

An earlier concept concerned with the subjective response of viewers was empathy (*Einfühlung*). This notion was developed by Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Empathy is a psychological concept which describes the process by which viewers identify with works of art by projecting emotions and muscular sensations into them. Aesthetic pleasure thus becomes objectified self-enjoyment. A fusion of subject and object is postulated. The issue of pleasure will be taken up later.

Reception theory assumes that reading or decoding is involved in the assimilation of a work of art, that subjects take an active not a passive part, though the degree to which readers complete a text or participate in the construction of its meaning is contentious. Reception theory or aesthetics tends to concern itself with the ideal reader implied by each work, whereas reception history tends to focus on actual readers. Of course, it often happens that those who read a text don't match the ideal reader or belong to the presumed constituency for whom it was intended.

As with linguistic ability, individuals vary in their competence

and performance. Each reading or response to a text is called an 'actualization' or 'concretization'. Some critics regard the concretizations of laypeople as partial realizations of the text when measured against the ideal of complete understanding, or when compared against the consensus reached by scholars over many years as to the text's meaning. A central problem of reception theory is that of deciding whether the variant readings and interpretations generated by different individuals and groups can be resolved by reference to a 'true', 'objective' meaning or whether one has to accept a multiplicity of competing interpretations. If one inclines to the latter view, is there any way of judging between discrepant readings? Or are they all equally valid and correct? If so, one could conclude that texts are meaningless because they can mean anything. Most theorists want to retain the idea of a text as an objective structure conditioning and controlling the response of the reader. Variant readings can be explained, rationally, by reference to such factors as ambiguous language, different contexts of encounter, and differences between readers. A text may have many meanings but the number is not infinite. Furthermore, the objectivity of the text is such that some readings can be demonstrated to be false: we have all misread a word and then, at a later time, discovered our error.

Mass communication theorists have argued that messages are encoded with a preferred meaning in mind. This they call the dominant meaning. Besides straightforward misreadings, two other kinds of reading are deemed possible: *negotiated*: that is, readers perceive the dominant meaning but they modify or inflect it according to their personal experience or situation; and *oppositional*: that is, readers understand the dominant meaning but they reject it or interpret it in a highly critical way (this type of response has also been called 'aberrant decoding').

One of the key postulates of reception theory is that all readers approach texts with an ideological frame of reference or horizon of expectations already in place; for example, they may already be familiar with the conventions of a genre. Artists have the choice of confirming or denying the reader's expectations. As Hans Jauss explains, artists sometimes lull the reader by con-

firming expectations at an early stage in order to surprise him or her at a later stage. The majority of texts are produced with a particular readership in mind but, as Jauss points out, there are some radical works 'which at the moment of their publication are not directed at any specific audience' but only at a future, potential audience. Such works 'break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can only gradually develop for them.'[7] Jauss goes on to argue that exceptional works of this kind establish a new canon of taste which has the effect of making the older works seem outmoded. Some types of experimental design by artist-designers would also fit this description.

A major difference between empirical studies of response and reception history is the latter's interest in the responses of previous generations. However, reception history attempts to go beyond the sequence-of-events type of history-writing by taking account of the present as well as the past. Modern theorists examining a painting by Leonardo, for example, have the benefit not only of their own concretizations but all earlier ones; thus their understanding of the work is enhanced. As Jauss puts it: 'The repossession of past works occurs simultaneously with the continual mediation of past and present art and of traditional evaluation and current literary attempts.' It might be argued that the experience of design does not normally call forth such complex responses but a design aficionado confronted by a modern reproduction of Marcel Breuer's 1925 Wassily chair might well respond in a comparable way.

In the view of some scholars, reception theory/history ought to concern itself with unpopular as well as with popular works of art. Theodor Adorno, in his 'Theses on the sociology of art', attacks the crudity of those reception studies which fail to consider the fact that there are some works of high quality which, quantitatively, have a negligible social impact. For Adorno, this is a social fact which is just as much in need of explanation as the fact that other works have mass appeal. Adorno had in mind certain avant garde or difficult works the social content of which 'sometimes rests precisely in the *protest* against social reception, particularly in relation to conventional and hardened

forms of consciousness'.[8] Can this argument be applied to design? Again, some forms of anti-design design might fulfil similar critical functions and thus remain unpopular.

How can design historians gather information about the processes of reception? A number of methods can be employed.

1. By self-analysis. Historians have privileged access to at least one consciousness. They can try to reflect critically upon their own responses and behaviour in relation to design.
2. By examining existing critical accounts. The reviews of products, buildings and so on found in newspapers, magazines and history books. These are written by professionals - journalists, experts, critics - and consequently, while their views may be detailed and informed, they may also be unrepresentative.
3. By using existing information. Sales figures, for example, are crude indicators of popularity and consumer trends. The drawback of statistics, of course, is that the information is quantitative not qualitative. Vandalism and graffiti can be considered direct signs of negative responses to advertisements and the built environment.
4. By observing how other people behave in relation to design. Such observation can be open or covert, casual or systematic. TV researchers have persuaded some families to permit a camera to be placed on the TV sets so that their behaviour is filmed whenever the set is on. 'Participant observation' is a method by which the researcher joins the group being studied for a period and seeks to learn by adopting the group's lifestyle.
5. By means of questionnaires and interviews. This method can yield much useful information but is limited by the fact that people may lie, or they may simply lack insight into their own unconscious behaviour. Devising questionnaires and conducting interviews are also specialist skills. In advertising and the social sciences, studies of human behaviour often involve deceiving participants in tests as to what is really being tested.
6. A combination of the above.

Clearly, research of this kind is also done by designers and market research agencies when they are planning new products

or seeking to improve existing ones. It is also the kind of work undertaken by sociologists and anthropologists. However, design historians are more disinterested than market researchers and more concerned with history than sociologists.

Gaining accurate information on the effects of design is difficult because people vary in their characters, tastes, needs, incomes, and so forth; thus, the impact of design is inevitably differential. Also, in everyday life people are exposed to a multiplicity of influences and forces; hence it is hard to isolate the impact of, say, one advertisement - though a sudden increase in sales might indicate a positive impact. It is even more problematical to estimate the global, long-term impact of advertising - what J. K. Galbraith has called 'relentless propaganda on behalf of goods in general'[9] - on a population. The correlation between violence on television and violence in society has proved hard to demonstrate; empirical research often yields contradictory or inconclusive results. Nevertheless, scholars and pundits will continue to draw conclusions and make generalizations on the basis of any evidence they can assemble. Perhaps the most clearcut cases of design's impact are those in which failure occurs: disasters and injuries are eloquent testimonies to poor design.[10]

In experiencing works of art, processes of reading, interpretation and evaluation take place. Emotional, aesthetic and pleasure responses are also involved. Comparable processes occur in relation to designed goods; consumers 'read' products and styles of design; they appreciate or detest the aesthetic and formal qualities of products and they interpret their messages and meanings. Furthermore, the consumer's relation to a product is, in most cases, more active than to a painting or sculpture. People do not just admire the visual appearance of cars, they get into them, drive, wash and mend them. Designed goods may lack the intellectual profundity of works of art but one could argue that the user's involvement with them is more physical and intimate - some designed goods are worn on the body. People who spend a great deal of time and money on the interior decor of their homes function to a considerable extent as designers in their own right. In short, the issue is not only what design does to people, but what people do with design.

An important contribution to the reception history of architecture is Phillipe Boudon's *Lived-in Architecture* (1972). Most accounts of architectural construction end the moment the building is completed; what happens to it subsequently remains a mystery; whether it fulfils the functions for which it was designed is likewise unknown; in other words, the life of the building, its occupancy and use by successive generations is ignored. Boudon's book is unusual precisely because it does consider such questions via a historical and sociological study of a low-cost housing settlement at Pessac, near Bordeaux, designed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s.

In the first part of his book Boudon traces the history of the project and examines the motives of the patron M. Frugès. He also describes Le Corbusier's aesthetic programme and the initial, shocked reaction of the local people to the radically modern design of the houses. In the second half he records, from interviews made 40 years later, the feelings, opinions and experiences of the inhabitants. These interviews are also analysed to discover what kind of criteria residents employ in their evaluation of buildings and these are compared to those favoured by professional architects.

Over the years the inhabitants of Pessac have gradually changed Le Corbusier's design to meet their own needs by altering colour schemes, by adding decoration, trees, shrubs, sheds, pitched roofs, by narrowing windows and converting spaces to other uses. What Boudon's research reveals is not simply the way in which Le Corbusier's architecture was critically received, but the way it was used and transformed. It is a study, therefore, of a secondary form of design by people who are not normally thought of as architects or designers.

Another perceptive example of reception history is Hebdige's article 'Object as image: the Italian scooter cycle' (1981).[11] As its title indicates, this paper argues that products are as much images as objects. It sets out to demonstrate how postwar Italian design in the form of scooters was received in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s – the positive response of the mods and the negative response of the rockers (who identified with British-made motor bikes). These products were regarded as

gendered: motor bikes were equated with masculinity, scooters with femininity. Hebdige also shows how the scooter was represented in various kinds of discourses, particularly advertising, films and tourism, and how the machines themselves were modified via customizing, which was done by specialist shops as well as the owners themselves.

Studies of audiences and consumers are, of course, commonplace in mass communication research. They are often called 'uses and gratification' studies. Such research immediately raises questions about people's desires and needs and whether 'real' or 'authentic' ones can be distinguished from those advertising and the mass media create, promote and satisfy. A spurious sense of individual freedom can be associated with consumerism: if ten packets of different brand washing powders are almost identical chemically, then the consumer's freedom to choose is illusory, especially if the choice itself has been pre-programmed by massive publicity campaigns. The freedom to choose between products also depends upon being able to afford them in the first place. In a consumer society the greater the wealth, the greater the freedom. Choice is also limited by what industry and the media are prepared to offer, by what will make a profit or attract large audiences. What a citizen really needs may not be available on the market at all. Consumer choice is thus a poor substitute for political choice/power.

In an effort to eliminate uncertainty from selling goods, firms, designers and advertisers have increasingly striven to design the consumer to the product. Consumers who are unaware of this process may overestimate their actual freedom of action. At the same time, it is clear that consumers and most design historians want to retain a sense that selecting and combining products allows scope for freedom and the expression of individuality. Certainly, the practice of *bricolage* is more resistant to business control than the selection of separate items.

Pleasure

In view of the fact that pleasure is such a significant ingredient in the appeal of design, fashion, shopping and consumption in

general, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to it by design historians. There is no equivalent in design history of Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976) or Freud's analysis of the mechanisms of humour in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) or Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975).[12] Even within the long history of visual arts criticism there is little intelligent discussion of aesthetic pleasure. Valuable, isolated insights can be found in the works of Freud, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu and Herbert Marcuse, none of them a design historian. It is generally within journalistic articles and reviews by such writers as Dick Hebdige, Peter York, Judith Williamson, Tom Wolfe and Stephen Bayley that there is a recognition of the importance of pleasure, passion and desire in the consumption of commodities; but a systematic study has yet to be undertaken.

Feminist critiques of pleasure, in particular those associated with the male gaze upon the bodies of women (voyeurism, scopophilia), could usefully be applied to design. The link between masculine recreations, sexism and patriarchal power is clearly evident in the discourse around automobiles and this is uncritically reproduced in Bayley's book *Sex, Drink and Fast Cars* (1986). Similarly, the pleasure imbalance between the sexes – women, it is argued, take greater pleasure in shopping and fashion than men do as compensation for a lack of power – needs further investigation. Also requiring much more analysis are the precise mechanisms by which pleasure is induced by design. Some studies of how still images, film and television evoke enjoyment have taken place but they need extending to the whole field of designed goods.

Any study of this kind would need to review the various types and phases of pleasure which exist. These can be preliminarily identified as follow?

1. *Pleasures of desire*: that is, the day dreams and fantasies concerning the future possession of designed goods. These are fuelled by advertising, window shopping and envying the possessions of others.

2. *Pleasures of purchase*: that is, the pleasures of shopping, spending money/buying and ownership.
3. *Pleasures of the object itself*: that is, its qualities of newness, perfection of finish, of design and aesthetic/decorative factors – colour, form, texture and so on – which appeal to the senses.
4. *Pleasures of use*: that is, the satisfactions gained when the product is convenient to use and performs as well as promised. These pleasures depend, of course, on the character of the product concerned: in the case of a car, for example, the use-pleasures may be speed and power; in the case of underwear, the use-pleasures may be erotic.
5. *Pleasures in respect of others*: that is, the social impression one makes via the ownership of goods: enhanced image, status or prestige, an impression of wealth or fine taste. Responses of envy, respect or sexual desire.

For every pleasure listed one can, of course, postulate a corresponding displeasure: the frustration at not being able to afford a desired object; the anger and irritation when an expensive product breaks down, is damaged or fails to function as promised; the new clothes which arouse contempt rather than admiration; and so on.

Taste

A key factor in the consumption of goods is the taste of the consumer: thus it is equally important to the design historian. Although taste is always manifested in relation to material things – the choice of a car or a wallpaper – it seems to belong more to the consumer than to the object. We do not speak of the taste of a building in the same way that we speak of the style of a building. (Though in the case of food, we do ascribe the sweetness of sugar to the sugar itself.) The preferences of consumers obviously have a feedback effect on manufacturing, and taste can therefore to some degree be considered a factor in production.

Taste is a puzzling and paradoxical concept: on the one hand,

the sensations of pleasure or displeasure aroused in the mouth by food and drink are physiological, automatic, immediate; on the other hand, people talk of 'an acquired taste' and 'a refined taste'. Whereas taste in the gustatory sense is experienced by everyone, having taste - in the sense of a discriminating ability - is often thought of as something possessed by a small minority. Some people are said to have good taste, while others are said to have bad taste. Several questions arise: is taste innate or learnt? Is taste something everyone has or only a few? What criteria govern the distinction between good and bad taste?

Historically, taste is closely linked with the connoisseur. Connoisseurship depends upon the ability to discriminate: to tell the authentic from the fake, the best from the worst. The taste of the connoisseur was something cultivated and refined over many years through the activity of examining works of art. Without accepting the absurd idea that there can be people without taste, it is possible to acknowledge that certain individuals can develop specialist skills - as in the case of professional wine and tea tasters.

Everyone has tastes in the sense of having preferences - likes and dislikes - in music, food, clothes and so forth, and these vary from person to person and from social group to social group. The apparently infinite variety of tastes produces a resistance to analysis. As the common expression - 'there's no accounting for taste' - indicates, taste is generally considered to be beyond the reach of rational, scientific inquiry. But is this really the case? A key reason for the fear of the study of taste is that it touches on the innermost being, the personal behaviour and values of everyone, including those making the study. Another source of resistance is the fact that a mapping of all the tastes of all the people making up a society would position everyone within particular groups or subcultures, thereby undermining the ideology of individualism - their sense that their tastes are unique, personal and private, having nothing to do with such factors as education, class, profession, and so forth.

There are four main kinds of writing on taste: philosophical-aesthetic studies theorizing about the faculty of judgement; empirical, experimental, psychological studies of artistic preferences

which often seek to explain them in terms of a theory of personality types; sociological studies of the tastes of different groups and strata within society; and historical studies. The third and fourth kinds are most relevant to design historians.

Art-historical accounts of taste such as F. Chambers' *The History of Taste* (1932), K. Clark's *The Gothic Revival, an Essay in the History of Taste* (1929), and F. Haskell's *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France* (1976), can be regarded as contributions to reception history since they record the changing patterns of likes and dislikes in respect to the arts, the ins and outs of fashion, and the succession of stylistic revivals, reinterpretations and reevaluations.

Peter Burke's *Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy* (1974) has a chapter on taste in which he considers the methodological problem of how taste is to be studied by art historians. Burke claims that the scholar 'will want to discover the standards of taste current in a particular society in a particular period, in order that we may see works of art, if only momentarily, with the eyes of the artist's contemporaries'.[13] He then goes on to argue that a knowledge of the aesthetic criteria governing standards of taste in Renaissance Italy could be gained by an examination of the critical vocabulary used by artists, scholars and patrons found in the appraisive literature and theoretical treatises of the period. Also included in this chapter is a valuable, if brief, discussion of the sociology of taste and the problems of demonstrating an exact correlation between different levels of social class/status and varieties of taste.

In the cases of texts concerned with contemporary art and design, the issue of taste is further complicated by the fact that the author's preferences are bound to play a part in the selection of the objects featured. Detachment and objectivity are thus much harder to achieve. Stephen Bayley's book *In Good Shape: Style in Industrial Products 1900 to 1960* (1979) was criticized by other design historians on the grounds that Bayley's feeling that the products in question were beautiful in form was not an adequate justification for their inclusion in a history of design. In fact, not all the items he selected were to

his liking: a 1950 British make of radio popular with many working-class families was dismissed with the words 'This strikingly ugly little radio'. One is entitled to ask, in whose eyes was the radio ugly? If the judgement was Bayley's alone then it conflicts with that of all those who bought the radio in the 1950s. In such a clash of tastes whose should prevail? As it stands Bayley's apparently authoritative remark is simply a flat assertion of truth: 'This radio is objectively ugly because my taste says that it is.' The reader learns little from such unsupported remarks. What the historian has to decide, therefore, when constructing a history is whose taste is to be given priority – that of the author, or that of the elite group who promote 'good' design, or that of the masses whose tastes govern the vast majority of goods sold?

A greater awareness of the complexity of taste is evident in the anthology Bayley edited in 1983 to accompany an exhibition held at the Boilerhouse Project entitled 'Taste: an Exhibition about Values in Design'. 'Taste', he claims, 'is really just another word for choice.' It evolved 'when at one moment in the past there was such diversity that it was necessary to make a clear statement about what constituted the "good" in design. Taste is not the whole of design because it ignores function and finance, but it is the most human, immediate and evocative part of it.'[14]

For much of his introduction Bayley uses the word 'Taste' with a capital 'T'. As Raymond Williams points out, this usage dates from the eighteenth century and involved 'the abstraction of a human faculty to a generalized polite attribute, emphasized by the capital letter and significantly associated ... with the notion of *Rules* and elsewhere with *Manners* ...'[15] This elitist notion – a minority have Taste, the majority do not – is of little relevance to a modern consumer society in which everyone with any money to spend can indulge their tastes whether these are, in the opinion of outsiders, good, bad or indifferent.

After a time Bayley recognizes this point. Once mass production made consumerism available to virtually all social classes 'then one single standard of taste could no longer be appropriate to the needs of the entire nation'. As diversity increased, as

products, brands and tastes multiplied, a disturbing relativity of values became evident and disagreements between different factions about what constituted good taste and good design became fiercer. In Britain, museums and councils of design were established by the guardians of 'good' design in an effort to raise standards of public taste to their exalted level.

The guardians of 'good' design tended to designate products they considered to be in bad taste as kitsch. Paradoxically, kitsch was enjoyed by two very different social groups: those who liked it unselfconsciously and considered it good, and those more sophisticated beings who relished it for its very awfulness, i.e. 'camp' taste.[16] Eventually, through an ironic inversion of values, 'good' design came to be regarded negatively, as signifying uninspired, puritanical and dull design.

Bayley's brief history of taste and design oscillates uneasily between the tastes of architects, designers and the tastes of consumers. Clearly, the two are closely linked without being identical. Designers can seek to lead or anticipate public taste but consumers may not agree to follow. Even so, designers are often taste leaders or makers. This was especially true in the realm of fashion in the immediate post-1945 period when the 'line' laid down by Parisian couturiers had the status of a papal edict for millions of women. Other leaders of taste include film, TV and pop music stars and entrepreneur-businesspeople such as Terence Conran (founder of the Habitat chain) and Barbara Hulanicki (founder of Biba).

Several inadequacies marred the exhibition and anthology: the show's focus on objects was misleading because taste is an attribute of people not objects in themselves; there was little attempt to clarify the relation between taste and social class, subcultures and lifestyles; no reference was made to the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose 1979 book *La Distinction* is – in spite of numerous theoretical problems – the most substantial and scientific contribution to the study of taste to date.[17]

If analysts seek to understand taste by concentrating upon individuals, they will be confronted by a mass of variations and differences. The accumulation of such data will reveal little. It is

only by considering individuals as members of social groups and these groups as elements in a total, dynamic system that any coherent picture can emerge. In other words, it is necessary to consider society as a whole and to look at the distribution and pattern of tastes within it in relation to other social factors such as class, profession, wealth and education. This ambitious objective is what Bourdieu attempts in *La Distinction*. He made use of questionnaires plus various records and statistics about the habits of the French people during the 1960s to produce a taste cartography of the whole society at a particular time. His fundamental assumption is that the taste preferences of any group cannot be understood in isolation but only as an assertion of difference relative to the tastes of all other groups. To dress as certain others do is to assert an identity with them but, simultaneously, it is also a choice amongst the total spectrum of ways of dressing which signals a rejection or difference from those other ways. If all the adults of a society owned a Mercedes this make of car could not function, as it does at the moment, as a sign of affluence and middle-class status in relation to cheaper cars such as Ford Escorts or Fiat Unos. Bourdieu's stress on the differential nature of taste derives from the linguistics of Saussure and his structuralism from the work of Lévi-Strauss.

Another striking characteristic of Bourdieu's mode of analysis is that it encompasses all kinds of tastes – in food, drink, clothes, interior decoration, art, sport and so on. The total ensemble of tastes must, he argues, be inextricably bound up with the lifestyle of the group concerned. And these tastes can be correlated with the factors of class fraction, economic capital, symbolic or cultural capital, employment and so forth. Bourdieu's text is far too long and complex to summarize any further here, but any future study of taste and design would have to take note of the findings of *La Distinction*.

Rubbish Theory

Designed artefacts, as everyone knows, are valued by human beings for their usefulness, their aesthetic qualities, their personal emotional associations, and for their monetary worth.

These values are capable of change over time. For instance, the economic value of a new car begins to decline as soon as it is purchased; after a few years it may become worthless; after a few more it may start to become valuable again (e.g. a vintage car). The questions arise: 'Is there a pattern to these value changes? Can they be explained theoretically?'

One writer who thinks so is Michael Thompson, a social anthropologist who has taught in art and design colleges. He is the author of a provocative text entitled *Rubbish Theory* (1979) which is concerned with 'the creation and destruction of value'. Artefacts, he argues, are 'socially malleable': the assignment of value is a social process which is not directly determined by the intrinsic characteristics of the object concerned. The same work of art may be regarded as a masterpiece by one person and junk by another: the object remains the same but the valuations differ.

An initial distinction he makes is between transient and durable objects. The former decrease in value over time and have finite lifespans (e.g. a used car), while the latter increase in value over time and have (ideally) infinite lifespans (e.g. an antique vase preserved in a museum or a private collection). What interests Thompson is how objects transfer from one category to the other. He wants a theory capable of dealing with dynamic processes not just a static situation. For goods to alter their status from transient to durable, he maintains, they must pass through a 'region of flexibility' which is in fact the zone of zero value we call *rubbish*. Rubbish, he argues, is a covert category upon which the whole social process depends. Of course, rubbish which is destroyed after being discarded cannot be restored to value (except by the recycling of its materials). However, at any one time a large number of artefacts exist in store in a kind of value-limbo.

A case study – the history of nineteenth-century woven silk pictures called Stevengraphs – enables Thompson to demonstrate how objects can alter their value over time. During their period of manufacture Stevengraphs were cheap, mass-produced kitsch. Then, for several decades, they were considered worthless junk. Finally, in the 1960s they began to become collectors' items. In

terms of rubbish theory they shifted from transient (decreasing economic value) to rubbish (no economic value) to durable (increasing economic value). A second example – the gentrification of Georgian terrace houses in Islington, London – shows the same process at work in architecture.

Linking his theory to the class/wealth structure of society, Thompson claims that 'those who own and control durable objects enjoy more power and prestige than those who live entirely in a world of transience or worse still, a world of rubbish.'[18] At this point he suggests his categories are associated with particular kinds of lifestyle, but it is not a suggestion which is followed up in any detail. What is clear is that as durable objects ascend in monetary value, so they ascend the class/wealth/power structure.

One of the greatest difficulties in writing history is to account for both persistence and change, and gradual and sudden change. Thompson finds the model he needs in catastrophe theory – derived from a theorem in topology first stated by René Thom – which describes mathematically how a sudden transformation from one situation to another can take place.

Rubbish Theory is a stimulating text which goes some way to explaining the kind of changes in valuation to which designed goods are subject. What remains to be explored are the precise interrelations between the different kinds of value ascribed to artefacts. For example, what correlation if any exists between the aesthetic valuation of an object and its market value?

The prices recorded in auction houses and second-hand shops for old goods over many years are an objective measure of changing valuations. Yet this measure is a limited one: objects of little monetary worth are treasured by their owners for personal reasons. In other words, knowledge of prices does not tell us much about the feelings and attitudes of people towards designed objects.

Human attitudes towards the past are inherently paradoxical and ambivalent: our very identities depend upon our past history and memories but to grow and develop we must change with the times; traditions provide continuity but to innovate we must break with them. (This subject is exhaustively explored in David Lowenthal's monumental study *The Past is a Foreign*

Country (1985).) Our feelings about the past also change as time elapses, indeed there seems to be a pattern to our shifting responses to fashions as they recede into the past. James Laver, the fashion historian, has pointed out that last year's fashion seems 'dowdy', after 10 or 20 years it seems 'hideous, absurd', after 30 years, 'amusing', after 50, 'quaint', after 70, 'charming', after 100, 'romantic', and after 150, 'beautiful'.[19] So the fashion remains the same, but our perception and valuation of it alters. It follows that there are two lines of development for the historian to track: the sequence of fashions themselves in which the new relentlessly replaces the old, and the sequence of valuations placed on these fashions by succeeding generations. From time to time the two lines will intersect as a positive evaluation of an old fashion results in a revival.

Notes and References

1. 'Satellite shopland: shopping centres of the future' *Equinox* series, Channel Four TV, 1 October 1987.
2. W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973).
3. See D. Chaney, 'The department store as a cultural form', *Theory, Culture and Society* 1 (3) 1983 pp. 22–31.
4. J. Winship, 'Options – for the way you want to live now', *Theory, Culture and Society* 1 (3) 1983 pp. 44–65.
5. W. F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); *Commodity Aesthetics, Ideology and Culture* (New York: International General, 1987).
6. For introductions to reception theory see R. C. Holub, *Reception Theory: a Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984); P. Hohendahl, 'Introduction to reception aesthetics', *New German Critique* (10) Winter 1977 pp. 29–63. For a critical assessment of reception theory by a Marxist literary critic see T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) pp. 74–90.
7. H. Jauss, 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory', *New Literary History* 2 (1) 1970 pp. 7–37.
8. T. Adorno, 'Theses on the sociology of art', *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (2) Spring 1972 pp. 121–8.
9. J. K. Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) p. 213.
10. See, for example, R. Nadar, *Unsafe at Any Speed* (New York:

Grossman, 1965) and P. Hall, *Great Planning Disasters* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980).

11. D. Hebdige, 'Object as image: the Italian scooter cycle', *Block* (5) 1981 pp. 44-64.
12. L. Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen* (16) 1975 pp. 6–18.
13. P. Burke, *Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974) p. 152.
14. S. Bayley (ed), *Taste: an Exhibition about Values in Design* (London: Boilerhouse Project/Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983) p. 11.
15. R. Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976) pp. 264–6.
16. See S. Sontag, 'Notes on camp', *Against Interpretation* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967) pp. 275–89.
17. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984; French edn 1979). For reviews see: M. Douglas, 'High culture and low', *Times Literary Supplement* 13 February 1981 pp. 163–4; J. Elster, 'Snobs', *London Review of Books* 3 (20) 5–18 November 1981 pp. 10–12; J. Frow, 'Accounting for tastes', *Cultural Studies* 1 (1) January 1987 pp. 59–73. See also special issues on Bourdieu: *Media, Culture & Society* 2 (3) July 1980 and *Theory, Culture & Society* 3 (3) 1986.
18. M. Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: the Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 45.
19. J. Laver, *Taste and Fashion from the French Revolution to the Present Day* (London: Harrap, rev. edn 1945) pp. 202, 208.