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DESIGN BY CHOICE

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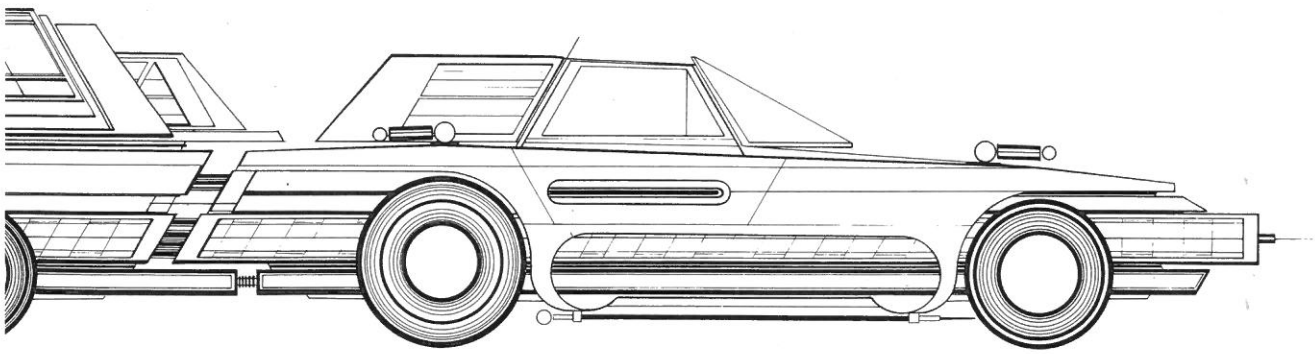

RIZZOLI
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2.2 A THROW-AWAY AESTHETIC

This article, written originally in 1955 and published in Industrial Design, *March 1960, under the title of 'Industrial Design and Popular Art', parallels similar inquiries by John McHale and Lawrence Alloway. In it Banham is searching for a way of describing popular aesthetics, for a set of criteria with which to discuss expendable consumer goods. He comes to the conclusion that urban popular culture studies must start with an analysis of content rather than form, and with the relationship between styling, symbolism and the consumer. This provides a methodological framework for many of his later studies.*

It is still little more than a century since the idea arose that the design of consumer goods should be the care and responsibility of practitioners and critics of fine arts. This conviction was part of the 19th-century democratic dream of creating a universal élite, in which every literate voter was to be his own aristocratic connoisseur and arbiter of taste – the assumption being that the gap between the fine arts and the popular arts was due only to the inadequate education of the 'masses'. This view of popular taste drew much of its strength from a romantic misconception of the Middle Ages: it assumed that because only well-designed and artist-decorated artifacts had survived from Gothic times, then all medieval men, from prince to peasant, must have possessed natural good taste. (Actually, all the evidence suggests is that only the expensive objects warranting elaborate decoration were sufficiently well-made to last five or six centuries, and we know practically nothing of the inexpensive artifacts of the period because few have survived.)

Nevertheless, this view of medieval goods did not entirely perish even after Art Nouveau's floridity had been rejected by the generation of designers and theorists who established themselves after 1905. Adolf Loos, rejecting all ornament, read the evidence to mean that later generations, with debased taste, had allowed all undecorated medieval craftwork to be destroyed, while carefully conserving the depraved and untypical ornamented examples. Loos, while an extremist, is fairly typical of his contemporaries who rejected all forms of ornament because they could find no meaning in it, and turned to the concept of 'pure form' because it offered proof against fallible human taste. This and other attitudes of their generation were synthesized after World War One by Gropius and Le Corbusier, in writings that postulated a sovereign hierarchy of the arts under the dominance of architecture, and a common dependence on laws of form that were objective, absolute, universal and eternally valid. The illusion of a common 'objectivity' residing in the concept of function, and in the laws of Platonic aesthetics, has been a stumbling block to product-criticism ever since.

In the century of fine art product-criticism now finishing, every school of thought, every climate of opinion, has had to formulate its attitude toward industrial production. In contrast to all earlier formulations, the 'neo-academic' synthesis just described – a mystique of form and function under the dominance of architecture - has won enthusiastic acceptance. It is the result of telescoping the Loosian ideas of pure, undecorated machine forms and Futurist ideas of the mechanized urban environment as the natural habitat of 20th-century man. But this telescoping, which brought machine products within the orbit of pure aesthetics, was achieved at the cost of ignoring three fundamental fallacies, which may be labelled: simplicity, objectivity, and standardization.

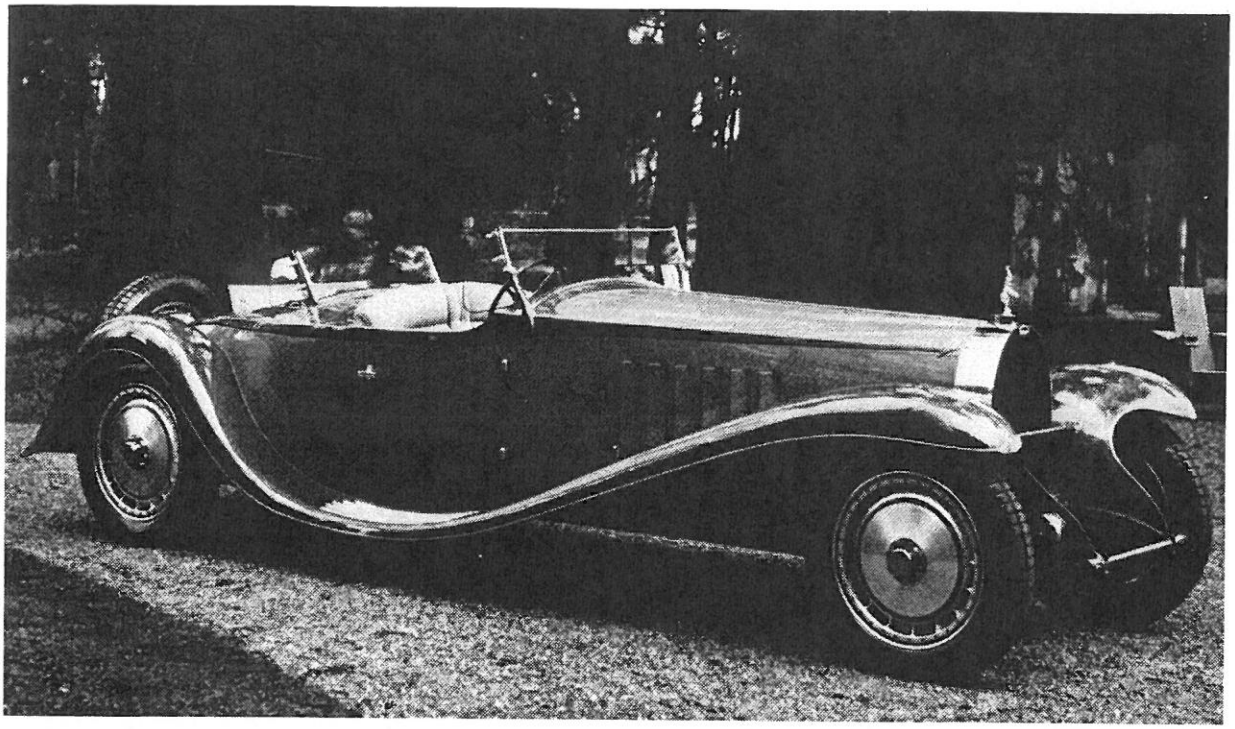
Geometrical *simplicity* has been identified as a basic preference of Platonic aesthetics since the end of the last century, and Plato's celebrated quotation that absolute beauty is found in 'forms such as are produced by the lathe, the potters' wheel, the compass and the rule' has been one of the most frequently quoted justifications for abstract art, and for supposing that product design should follow its laws. Neo-academic critics of 1900–30 could see in such fields as bridge-building and vehicle design, quite accidentally, the same sort of rule-and-compass geometry of which Plato approved.

Although these resemblances are obviously a mere coincidence depending on the aesthetic atmosphere of the period and the primitive condition of vehicle design, the neo-academic critics took them as proof of the *objectivity* of their attitude. Engineers were believed to be working without aesthetic contamination and according to immutable physical laws. To this misconception, they added a confusion between the meaning of objectivity in mechanical engineering laws and in the laws of aesthetics (the latter meaning that their logic is impeccable, not that their factual basis has been subjected to scientific evaluation). The neo-academics then succeeded in circulating the belief that all mechanically-produced articles should be simple in form, and answer to abstract and supposedly permanent laws based on architectural practice. The final absurdity of this view is found in Herbert Read's influential book, *Art and Industry*, epitomized in two quotations. The first draws an unwarranted conclusion from an impeccable observation: 'The engineer's and the architect's designs approach one another in aesthetic effect. Entirely different problems are being solved, but the same absolute sense of order and harmony presides over each.' The aesthetic prejudice suggested in this conclusion reveals itself in another, quite meaningless as a statement of fact but instructive as a rhetorical flourish: 'The machine has rejected ornament.'

Somewhere in this confusion lies the third of the concealed difficulties – *standardization*. This word has been used in a muddled way by many 'machine aesthetes' in a manner that suggests a mark, an ideal, at which to aim. But in engineering, a standardized product is essentially a norm stabilized only for the moment, the very opposite of an ideal because it is a compromise between possible production and possible further development into a new and more desirable norm. This double expendability, which involves not only the object itself but also the norm or type to which it belongs, is actually what excludes mass-produced goods from the categories of Platonic philosophy.

We live in a throw-away economy, a culture in which the most fundamental classification of our ideas and worldly possessions is in terms of their relative expendability. Our buildings may stand for a millennium, but their mechanical equipment must be replaced in fifty years, their furniture in twenty. A mathematical model may last long enough to solve a particular problem, which may be as long as it takes to read a newspaper, but newspaper and model will be forgotten together in the morning, and a research rocket – apex of our technological adventure – may be burned out and wrecked in a matter of minutes.

It is clearly absurd to demand that objects designed for a short useful life should exhibit qualities signifying eternal validity – such qualitities as 'divine' proportion, 'pure' form or



1 *Bugatti Royale Type 41*, designed by Jean Bugatti, c.1931.

'harmony' of colours. In fairness to Le Corbusier, it should be remembered that he was the first to raise the problem of permanence and expendability in engineering: 'Ephemeral beauty so quickly becomes ridiculous. The smoking steam engine that spurred Huysmann to spontaneous lyricism is now only rust among locomotives; the automobile of next year's show will be the death of the Citroën body that arouses such excitement today.' Yet, recognizing this much, he declined to accept the consequences. He singled out the work of Ettore Bugatti for special praise, using components from his cars as examples of engineering design that supported his fine art view of product aesthetics.

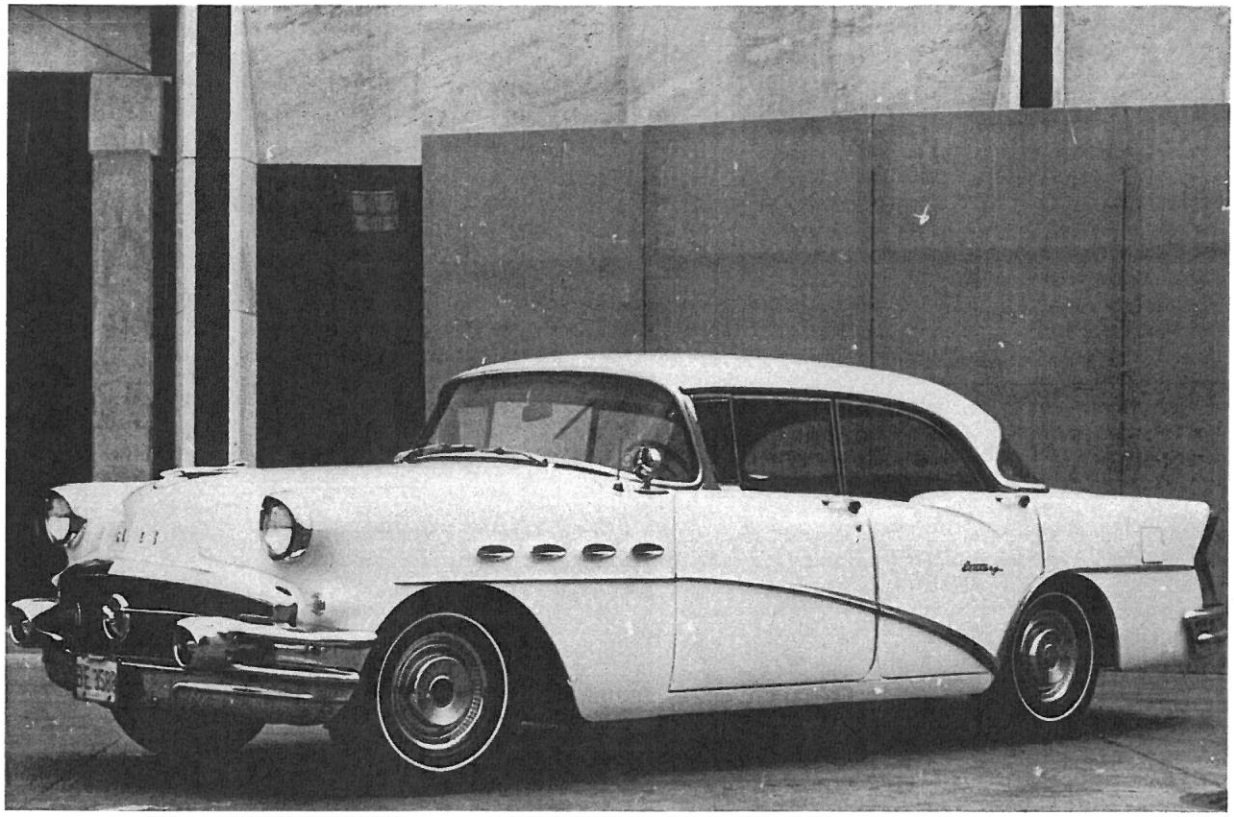
As a result, the engines of the Bugatti cars have been regarded as models of the highest flights of engineering imagination – *except* by some of the most distinguished automobile designers. Jean Gregoire, for example, on whose work in the field of front-wheel drive all subsequent vehicles of this type depend, has refused to find the Bugatti engine admirable. He speaks from inside engineering: 'In a particular component, mechanical beauty corresponds to the best use of materials according to the current state of technique. It follows that beauty can vary, because the technique, upon which the utilization of material depends, is progressive.' He goes on to develop a type of product criticism that is unique and instructive:

> As might be expected, Bugatti was proud of his eyes. He loved engines that had straight sides and polished surfaces behind which manifolds and accessories lay hidden.... At the risk of making the reader jump six feet in the air, I consider many American engines, surrounded as they are by forests of wire and bits and pieces, and designed without thought for line, to be nearer to beauty than the elegant Bugatti engines. An engine in which the manifolds are hidden in the cylinder-head, the wiring concealed under the covers, and the accessories lurk under the crankcase – all for the sake of 'beauty' – is less good-looking than the motor where the manifolds are clearly seen.

This deliberate rebuttal of neo-academic standards must make us ask by what standards he judges what he sees. A comparison between the Bugatti engine and an American V-8 will serve for study. The Bugatti offers a rectangular silhouette with a neutral, unvaried handicraft surface, compartmented into forms that answer closely the Platonic ideals of the circle and square. (With these words one might also describe, say, a relief by Ben Nicholson, and we should remember that Bugatti had been an art student of the same generation as the pioneers of abstract art.) The Buick V-8 of 1955, on the other hand, presents a great variety of surface materials, none of them handwrought, in complex, curving, three-dimensional forms composed into a block with an irregular and asymmetrical silhouette. No doubt impeccable functional reasons could be found for these differences, but one should also note that both engines show considerable care in their visual presentation.

The Bugatti, riding high between the sides of a narrow bonnet, is meant to be seen (as well as serviced) from the side. The Buick, spreading wide under a low 'alligator hood', has its components grouped on top, not only for easy access but also to make an exciting display. The Bugatti, as Gregoire noted, conceals many components and presents an almost two-dimensional picture to the eye, while the Buick flaunts as many accessories as possible in a rich three-dimensional composition, countering Bugatti's fine art reticence with a wild rhetoric of power. This difference – basically the preference of a topological organization to a geometrical one – might be likened to the difference between a Mondriaan painting and a Jackson Pollock, but this would be no answer to our present problem because it merely substitutes one fine art aesthetic for another.

If we examine the qualities that give the Buick engine its unmistakable and exciting character, we find glitter, a sense



2 *Buick Century de Luxe Riviera Sedan*, 1956.

of bulk, a sense of three-dimensionality, a deliberate exposure of technical means, all building up to signify power and make an immediate impact on whoever sees it. Now these are not the qualities of the fine arts: glitter went out with the gold skies of Gothic painting, Platonic and neo-academic aesthetics belong to the two-dimensional world of the drawing board. But if they are not the qualities of the fine arts, they are conspicuously those of the popular arts.

The words 'popular arts' do not mean the naive or debased arts practised by primitives and peasants, since they inhabit cultures in which such artifacts as Buicks have no part. The popular arts of motorized, mechanized cultures are manifestations like the cinema, picture magazines, science fiction, comic books, radio, television, dance music, sport. The Buick engine, with its glitter, technical bravura, sophistication and lack of reticence admirably fulfils the definition of 'Pop Art' of Leslie Fiedler: 'Contemporary popular culture, which is a function of an industrialized society, is distinguished from other folk art by its refusal to be shabby or second rate in appearance, by a refusal to know its place. Yet the articles of popular culture are made, not to be treasured, but to be thrown away.' This short passage (from an essay on comic books) brings together practically all the cultural facts that are relevant to the Buick.

We have discussed the absurdity of requiring durable aesthetic qualities in expendable products, but we should note that aesthetic qualities are themselves expendable, or liable to *consumo* or wastage of effect, in the words of Dorfles and Paci; and this using up of aesthetic effect in everyday objects is due, precisely, to that daily use. We can see the correctness of this in communications jargon: the 'signal strength' of many aesthetic effects is very low; and being unable to compete with the 'random noise' aroused in situations of practical use, any low-strength signal (fine arts or otherwise) will be debased, distorted or rendered meaningless where use is the dominant factor. Such situations require an aesthetic effect with high immediate signal strength; it will not matter if the signal strength is liable to taper off suddenly, if the object itself is expendable, since the signal strength can always be kept up if the signal itself is so designed that use acts on it as an *amplifier*, rather than as random noise.

In other words, if one opens the Bugatti hood and finds that motor covered with oil, one's aesthetic displeasure at seeing a work of fine art disfigured would be deepened by the difficulty of repair work when the ailing component proves to be hidden away inside the block 'for the sake of beauty'. In similar circumstances, the Buick would probably be far less disfigured by an oil leak, and its display of components makes for much easier repairs, so that visual gratification is reinforced by the quality of the motor as an object of use.

More than this, the close link between the technical and aesthetic qualities of the Buick ensures that both sets of qualities have the same useful life, and that when the product is technically outmoded it will be so aesthetically. It will not linger on, as does the Bugatti, making forlorn claims to be a perennial monument of abstract art. This, in fact, is the solution to Le Corbusier's dilemma about the imminent death of the 'body that now causes excitement'. If these products have been designed specifically for transitory beauty according to an expendable aesthetic, then they will fall not into ridicule, but into a calculated oblivion where they can no longer embarrass their designers. It is the Bugatti

that becomes ridiculous as an object of use, by making aesthetic claims that persist long after its functional utility is exhausted.

We may now advance as a working hypothesis for a design philosophy this proposition: 'The aesthetics of consumer goods are those of the popular arts'. But this still leaves us with the problem of how such an hypothesis may be put into a working methodology.

Unlike criticism of fine arts, the criticism of popular arts depends on an analysis of content, an appreciation of superficial rather than abstract qualities, and an outward orientation that sees the history of the product as an interaction between the sources of the symbols and the consumer's understanding of them. To quote Bruno Alfieri about the 1947 Studebaker, 'The power of the motor seems to correspond to an aerial hood, an irresistible sensation of speed'. He sees a symbolic link between the power of the motor and the appearance of its housing, and this is made explicit by the use of an iconography based on the forms of jet aircraft. Thus we are dealing with a *content* (idea of power), a *source* of symbols (aircraft), and a *popular culture* (whose members recognize these symbols and their meaning). The connecting element between them is the industrial designer, with his ability to deploy the elements of his iconography – his command and understanding of popular symbolism.

The function of these symbol systems is always to link the product to something that is popularly recognized as good, desirable or exciting – they link the dreams that money can buy to the ultimate dreams of popular culture. In this they are not, as many European critics suppose, specific to America. They can be found in any progressive industrialized society. An example in Italian design is the Alfa Giulietta whose diminutive tail fins might be defended in terms of body fabrication, the need to carry the tail-lights, or the abstract composition of the side elevation. But how much more effective they are in evoking the world of sports-cars and aerodynamic research that is one of the ultimate dreams of automobilism. Not all iconographies are so specific; such concepts as the good life in the open air, the pleasures of sex, and conspicuous consumption are other sources of symbols, and it is clear that the more specific any symbol is, the more discretion must be used in its application.

These trends, which become more pronounced as a culture becomes more mechanized and the mass-market is taken over by middle-class employees of increasing education, indicate the function of the product critic in the field of design as popular art: Not to disdain what sells but to help answer the now important question, 'What *will* sell?' Both designer and critic, by their command of market statistics and their imaginative skill in using them to predict, introduce an element of control that feeds back information into industry. Their interest in the field of design-as-popular-symbolism is in the pattern of the market as the crystallization of popular dreams and desire – the pattern as it is about to occur. Both designer and critic must be in close touch with the dynamics of mass-communication. The critic, especially, must have the ability to sell the public to the manufacturer, the courage to speak out in the face of academic hostility, the knowledge to decide where, when and to what extent the standards of the popular arts are preferable to those of the fine arts. He must project the future dreams and desires of people as one who speaks from within their ranks. It is only thus that he can participate in the extraordinary adventure of mass-production, which counters the old aristocratic and defeatist 19th-century slogan, 'Few, but roses', and its implied corollary, 'Multitudes are weeds', with a new slogan that cuts across all academic categories: 'Many, because orchids.'