

## **Automobile Aesthetics: Humean Perspectives and Problems**

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### **Abstract.**

Human relationships with cars are multifaceted and morally fraught. Cars serve multiple functions, and generate experiences characteristic of both fine art and everyday aesthetic experience – but they're also the roots of dire eco-social ills. Recent theories tend to undermine the aesthetic aspects of human-automobile relationships in order to emphasize cars' ethically problematic effects. But cars' shameful consequences need not cancel out their beauty or their relevance to aesthetic theories. I suggest that David Hume's aesthetic tenets demonstrate how and why cars are beautiful, foregrounding considerations that automobile aesthetics can't afford to ignore but that risk being obscured by cars' positively and negatively charged status. For instance, Hume underscores rational choice as an element of aesthetic experience: we can choose how and when to experience cars' beauty or ugliness. According to Hume, utility tends to inspire sentiments of beauty; and what is ethically good is most useful to humanity at large. But tension arises from this principle, as Hume finds that even socially harmful phenomena are yet aesthetically interesting. This provocative tension is at the heart of the aesthetic appreciation of cars, and is part of what makes such appreciation worthwhile. Hume paves the way to a realistic aesthetics of automobiles that can account for their problematic effects while refusing to downplay their aesthetic potential.

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### **Introduction.**

A TV commercial for the 2011 Chrysler 300 lists a few qualities that contribute to the greatness of a great car. First, character and conviction: charming aesthetic attributes. Then luxury, speed, fuel efficiency. These are utilitarian features. But they come with consequences that make some ecologists, social critics, and aestheticians uncomfortable. In general, human relationships with cars are multifaceted and morally fraught. Recent theories consequently tend to undermine the aesthetic aspects of human-automobile relationships, in order to emphasize cars' ethically problematic

effects. However, David Hume's aesthetics may provide a framework whence we might acknowledge the cohabitation of beauty and shame in our experiences with cars, pointing the way towards a realistic aesthetics of automobiles.

Cars exemplify the principles of fine-art aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, but repulse several aestheticians who work in both arenas. For example, Noël Carroll explicitly excludes cars from the realm of art, even though his definition of "art" fully accommodates cars. In his conception, something is an artwork if one can find a narrative explanation that "links the contested work to preceding art, and artmaking practices and contexts, in such a way that the work under fire can be seen to be the intelligible outcome of recognizable modes of thinking and making already of a sort commonly adjudged to be artistic."<sup>1</sup> Since historians acknowledge that automobile design has roots in Art Deco and Art Nouveau,<sup>2</sup> and since cars are regularly exhibited by fine-art museums: by Carroll's definition, cars are works of art. However, Carroll insists that his definition of art excludes automobiles. He does not say why, only contends that those who do believe "a Cadillac convertible would be a work of art" must be operating with false definitions of art.<sup>3</sup>

Cars also generate the aesthetic experiences that Yuriko Saito and Sherri Irvin identify as integral to everyday experience. If, as for Saito, an aesthetic reaction is "any reaction we form toward the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity"; then enjoying the way a new Jeep bucks at the slightest touch of the gas, or sensing cheery steadfastness in the boxy lines of an old CR-V, constitutes aesthetic experience.<sup>4</sup> By Irvin's definition, in which an everyday aesthetic experience "involves my imparting a certain shape or texture to a small part of my life, over and

above any other goal I might be aiming to fulfill,” the small pleasures one might take in careening through the fast lane, or in a carwash well done, are valuable aesthetic experiences.<sup>5</sup> Yet, cars receive no mention in Saito’s otherwise comprehensive study; and for Irvin, as I’ll discuss later, cars are incompatible with the aesthetic. Like Carroll, neither Saito nor Irvin offers reasons for excluding cars from aesthetic experience. All three authors take it for granted that cars cannot be aesthetically valuable.

It is more than likely that existing notions neither of “art” nor of “aesthetic experience” can entirely do justice to our aesthetic relationships with cars. But that question is for another day, and a comprehensive theory of automotive experience. Here I’d venture to suggest that it’s probably on ethical grounds that these aestheticians I have quoted are loath to value or even mention cars. People tend love cars for their unique appeal to all the senses, their associations with freedom, glamour, and ingenuity; nonetheless the car as such, along with its very concept and mode of being, is also associated with global warming and other dire risks to the environment, with untimely death and pretentious excess. Perhaps the theorists I have mentioned cannot dissociate these concerns from cars’ aesthetic potential.

Likewise, for Hume: beauty, morality, and utility are irrevocably intertwined. Yet, from a Humean perspective, cars’ potentially unethical effects need not cancel out their beauty or their relevance to aesthetic theories. Hume’s aesthetic tenets demonstrate how and why cars are beautiful, foregrounding considerations that automobile aesthetics can’t afford to ignore but that risk being obscured by cars’ positively and negatively charged status. In turn, considering cars from a Humean standpoint encourages provocative perspectives on Hume’s ideas.

Let me make clear: my purpose in theorizing automobile aesthetics is not to argue that cars should be championed or banned. I am not here to say that SUVs and supercars are bad while hybrids are good, or to argue the opposite point. Just to give you an idea of where I stand as a car owner, my pride and joy is a 2001 Honda CR-V, the non-limited edition with the 4-cylinder engine, which gets up to 23 mpg on the highway. This wagon is middle-of-the-road in terms of size, price, and popularity. It's also the vehicle that made me love and start to think deeply about the automotive in general. To return to business: my purpose today is merely to begin to theorize how humans relate to automobiles. Already we can see that this relationship is complex, rife with tension, and in some aspects – for better or worse – aesthetic.

**Humean Point 1. Sentiments of beauty are contextually independent and deliberately shaped.**

In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume evaluates the beauty of poetry and drama alongside that of machines, houses, and moral acts, according to the same standards. Beauty and ugliness are pleasurable and painful “sentiments” that may be triggered by a variety of phenomena, but that we nonetheless experience for the same reasons in every case.<sup>6</sup> “The same endowments,” in Hume’s words, bring about the sentiment of beauty “in every circumstance.”<sup>7</sup> Hence the visible qualities that make a painting beautiful may also make a car beautiful. This view may be read as a contrast to that of Saito, who writes that:

the aesthetic dimension of our life which is deeply embedded in our everyday affairs, while it can be influenced by art, operates quite independently from our experience of art...Art, whatever its designation, no matter how inclusive that notion becomes, and even when its intent is to blur the distinction from life, is necessarily characterized as an *exception to or commentary on* everyday objects and affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Hume's view is more convincing, in my opinion: it is highly plausible that our standards and impressions of beauty operate in the same way regardless of context.

As at once art objects, tools, and "vehicles" of aesthetic experience, cars exemplify Hume's point. Collector Ralph Lauren implies that part of what makes a car "exciting" to drive are the "visual qualities...[it shares] with a painting" – such as "the outside ornamentation" on his 1938 Bugatti Atlantic, "a rare and magnificently designed car" that's been exhibited in several fine-art museums.<sup>9</sup> Thus the experience of the automobile as art is not distinct from the experience of the car as a mode of transport. In other words, cars may trigger sentiments of beauty in any situation. The Atlantic's visual countenance, made striking by the split windshield and the grille's teardrop shape, is just as eye-catching from behind the wheel or the neighboring lane as it is behind velvet ropes. The same qualities – prestigious vintage, visible uniqueness – make the Atlantic beautiful "in every circumstance"; and these qualities are as beautiful in the Atlantic as they are in other "aesthetic circumstances" like paintings and sculptures.

That said, we ourselves determine the characters of our aesthetic encounters with cars, as Roland Barthes does in an essay on the 1960 Citroën DS 19. Barthes juxtaposes notions of automotive beauty as the spirituality and grandiosity of art, with

impressions of cars as ordinary, familiar comforts. At first, he writes: “I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists.”<sup>10</sup> The DS, humorously called “*Déesse*,” goddess, is no exception; but later in the essay Barthes re-visions the car as “humanized...more objectlike...more homely,” a sublime “utensil.”<sup>11</sup> His flexible response to the DS demonstrates how one can willfully vary one’s aesthetic experience of cars: one may transform one’s own experience from that of fine art to that of quotidian utensils and back again.

This adaptable perspective exemplifies Hume’s contention that our assessments of beauty are not merely passive reactions impressed upon us by external objects – rather we can, through applications of our reason, deliberately shape our aesthetic sentiments. To be sure, Hume writes, the decision that something is beautiful “depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species...But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment...”<sup>12</sup> As Peter Kivy notes, for Hume the judgment of beauty is undeniably “epistemic”:<sup>13</sup> it is determined by pre-existing knowledge and beliefs, and it “demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties.”<sup>14</sup> We can and should *choose* how and when we consider cars beautiful, and make that choice in light of what we believe about cars’ uses and detriments.

## **Humean Point 2. Utility is a determinant of beauty.**

In Hume’s estimation, “works of art are esteemed beautiful, in proportion to their fitness for the use of man.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore a “machine, a piece of furniture, a vestment, a

house well contrived for use and conveniency, is so far beautiful, and is contemplated with pleasure and approbation.”<sup>16</sup> A sentiment of beauty includes and depends upon a simultaneous impression of utility. Contemporary theorists maintain this proposition. Steven Davies proposes that useful objects are works of art when “they *integrate* their practical and aesthetic functions.”<sup>17</sup> Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons theorize “functional beauty” as a kind of beauty that emerges from an object’s ability to perform its proper function.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, among automotive journalists, what makes a car quick and fun to drive also makes it beautiful. Sexy designs, however great they look, make a car less pleasing if they hamper its handling and performance. Consider Frank Markus’ damaging review of the 2010 Chevrolet Camaro for *Motor Trend*: “While most of us still like the retro-riff design theme, we no longer love it enough to forgive the huge penalties it exacts on the packaging.”<sup>19</sup> The Camaro’s design makes it too heavy to perform well against competing vehicles in its class. Its body shape “make[s] it difficult to sight through left-turn apexes...and the exaggerated and oversized steering-wheel rim and shifter make the driver feel small (aren’t these cars supposed to do the opposite?).”<sup>20</sup>

Markus alludes to a key idiosyncrasy of automotive utility. Cars have multiple, sometimes conflicting functions. An automobile’s usefulness is contingent on its ability to transport passengers quickly, safely, and efficiently, *as well* as its ability to create an agreeable self-image for its driver who, in a Camaro, should be given to feel anything but “small.” A car’s visible beauty is useful to its driver when it helps to convey what she wants others to believe about her. This goes for car-inhabited nations and societies as well as individual manufacturers and drivers. Stephen Gundle notes that during the

twentieth century, the powerful image that America projected onto the world-screen was shaped and conveyed, deliberately and to a considerable extent, by the designs of American cars – machines like GM's 1959 Cadillac Coupe de Ville, which “kick-started the imagination...express[ing] confidence, excitement, and even joy.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet by pointing out that the Camaro fails at both its functions – being driveable and projecting an alluring image – Markus isn't claiming that it's ugly: he confesses to “lik[ing] the retro-riff design.” Thus although, for Hume and others, it seems intuitive to postulate a relationship between a thing's beauty and its ability to perform its function(s), that relationship isn't necessarily a positive correlation.<sup>22</sup> The aesthetic appreciation of automobiles brings this issue to the forefront.

### **Humean Point 3. Beauty, utility, and morality are inseparable.**

Hume emphasizes *social* utility as fundamental to beauty: “everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, since a sentiment of beauty includes an intimation of utility, it also includes morality: the impression that the object or action under consideration is beneficial to all mankind.<sup>24</sup> This is because, according to Hume, “a concern for others” is a motivating “principle in our nature as humanity.”<sup>25</sup>

Cars are indeed beneficial to contemporary human society. We rely on trucks to supply food and other necessities; and our economy would grind to a standstill without the presupposition that most people can get to work in a few minutes. From another perspective, though, the use and abuse of cars is less than constructive. Consider the vast numbers who die in road accidents, the massive contribution of exhaust fumes to



global warming, the wastefulness that results from the popular practice of trading in one's car every three years. Although many of cars' detrimental social effects result from their abuse by human drivers and marketers – reckless driving and premature trade-ins are human, not automotive, faults – the very existence of cars does affect our planet adversely. Is it just, even accurate, to call such things beautiful?

To my ears, Irvin offers a resounding “No.” She probably has cars in mind when she writes: “This continually escalating pursuit of material things...leads to exhaustion of natural resources and harm to the environment, as we shelve or throw away goods that are still in working order and seek after ever bigger and shinier and faster symbols of status.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, she argues, “what is needed is attention to the aesthetic elements already present in daily experience, to the rich and varied – and, if we attend carefully, complex and multisensory – satisfactions to be had in moments that do *not* involve Humvees or iPods or designer jeans,” or any other representative of excess, *even though*, especially in contemporary Western society, Humvees and so on are very much part of the daily experiences even of those who drive past them but don't own them.<sup>27</sup> Hume agrees that because “luxury” was once “universally regarded as a vice,” it cannot incite sentiments of beauty.<sup>28</sup> But while Hume might therefore claim that cars are ugly – albeit not necessarily, given his other tenets – Irvin implies that they should not be subject to aesthetic “attention” at all.

However, consider this: music may be said to perpetuate similar eco-social ills. Kant and Plato claimed that music pollutes the air and moral sensibilities. The recording industry enables and encourages listeners to buy CDs and mp3s and discard them after a few months, once they're no longer fashionable. And it's public knowledge that the

American military uses music as a weapon of torture and warfare.<sup>29</sup> Is music therefore unworthy of beauty, or of consideration by aestheticians? Or is moral worthiness an inappropriate criterion of aesthetic value?

Both these options are unacceptable, even where cars are concerned. Rather than dismissing either cars' aesthetic potential or morality's influence on sentiments of beauty, we should perhaps consider the possibility that amorality and *nonutility* can coexist with beauty – admittedly in a tense relationship.

Hume alights upon this tension when he writes of the poet Sannazarius. In Hume's view, this poet "erred" by setting a poem at "the sea-shore, though he presented the most magnificent object in nature" – the ocean.<sup>30</sup> The error arises because the ocean causes "toil, labor, and danger [to be] suffered by the fishermen"; and this is "painful" to readers, thanks to "an unavoidable sympathy" they feel with the fishermen.<sup>31</sup> The fishermen's pain theoretically precludes the poem and the ocean from engendering sentiments of beauty. Nevertheless, Hume can't help observing that the ocean is aesthetically impressive: "magnificent" in fact. He makes no further remark on this evocative friction, which pervades Sannazarius' poem and its subject: although the sea is dangerous, it is aesthetically appreciable, possessed of a sublime species of beauty.

This strained relationship between beauty and benefit is at the heart of automobile aesthetics. Cars' harmful eco-social effects conflict with their utility and beauty but, as I have shown, do not bar utility and beauty from our automotive experiences. Moreover, the aesthetic consideration of automobiles underscores this

provocative dissonance in Hume's equation of beauty, utility, and morality. In my view, theoretical considerations of automobiles should overlook none of these aspects.

### **To Conclude.**

Cars are contentious and unique aesthetic problems. Nonetheless, I've proposed that automobile aesthetics may take inspiration from, and provide critical perspectives on, three of Hume's aesthetic tenets. In support of this proposal, I've attempted to demonstrate that, first: a car can be experienced as an elevated work of art and as a mundane tool; and we may alternate at will between these experiences. Second: to a significant extent, the beauty we may sense in cars or their characteristics sometimes, but not always, hinges on their usefulness to their owners and societies. Third: cars' adverse eco-social effects influence but do not annul their aesthetic value, and must be taken into account as roots of a provocative friction between beauty and morality.

The ambivalence in all these observations indicates that aesthetic considerations of automobiles are as ambiguous as they are controversial. In itself, this ambiguity – which Hume to some extent anticipates – makes aesthetic reflection on cars not just intriguingly difficult, but also necessary. Because automobile aesthetics, exhaustively considered, foregrounds vital issues that, at this moment, are pressingly at stake: not just the definitions of art and aesthetic experience; but also the condition of the (quote-unquote) “developed” or “First” World, in which beauty, convenience, and comfort knowingly ride on the backs of social and ecological violence.

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- <sup>1</sup> Noël Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.27.
- <sup>2</sup> Edson C. Armi, *The Art of American Car Design* (Princeton University Press, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions*, p.48.
- <sup>4</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.9.
- <sup>5</sup> Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 1 (2008): 29-44, at p.31.
- <sup>6</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), p.437.
- <sup>7</sup> Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 1777, reprinted 2008), p.235.
- <sup>8</sup> Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 40. Emphasis original.
- <sup>9</sup> Ralph Lauren quoted in Beverly Rae Kimes, Winston Goodfellow, and Michael Furman, *Speed, Style, and Beauty* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), p.xiii.
- <sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, "The New Citroen," in *Mythologies*, ed. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972): 88-90, at p.88.
- <sup>11</sup> Barthes, "Citroen," p.89.
- <sup>12</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 173.
- <sup>13</sup> Kivy underscores Hume's efforts to escape the doctrine, propounded by Frances Hutcheson and others, that sentiments of beauty are "non-epistemic," i.e. that perception generally occurs independently of knowledge- and belief-formation. Peter Kivy, "Hume's Neighbor's Wife: An Essay on the Evolution of Hume's Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 3 (1983): 195-208, at pp.197-98. See also Timothy M. Costelloe, "Hume's Aesthetics: The Literature and Directions for Research," *Hume Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 87-126, at p.98.
- <sup>14</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.173.
- <sup>15</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 437.
- <sup>16</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 179.
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen Davies, *Philosophical Perspectives on Art* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.96. Emphasis original.
- <sup>18</sup> Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.2-23.
- <sup>19</sup> Frank Markus, with Ron Kiino and Edward Loh, "Ponycar Showdown," *Motor Trend* July 2010: 44-79, at p.48.
- <sup>20</sup> Markus, "Ponycar Showdown," p.48.
- <sup>21</sup> Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 233-34.
- <sup>22</sup> For further discussion of strained relationships between beauty and function, see Carlson and Parsons, *Functional Beauty*, pp.109-110, 225-227.
- <sup>23</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.219.
- <sup>24</sup> Kivy argues that Hume's aesthetic remarks, which Hume does not articulate systematically, are made only to clarify and strengthen his moral theories. Kivy, "Hume's Neighbor's Wife," p.198.
- <sup>25</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.231.
- <sup>26</sup> Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic," p.41.
- <sup>27</sup> Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic," p.42. Emphasis added.
- <sup>28</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.181.
- <sup>29</sup> See Suzanne G. Cusick, "Music as Torture / Music as Weapon," *Transcultural Music Review* 10 (2006), at <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/a152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon>. And Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (MIT Press, 2009).
- <sup>30</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.222.
- <sup>31</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, p.222.