



The human body: From its instrumentality to its axiological precedence in the contemporary art of design

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ABSTRACT

Heidegger's notion of 'handiness' combines two meanings, which in my view should be separated. They both refer to ways of characterizing tools in a given culture. Every culture uses tools, and they are all used so they are 'handy'. The question is: Handy with regard to what? Two answers come to mind. The first one suggests that handiness is typical of the aims achieved in a given culture, which are linked with that culture's system of values. Having been fulfilled, the aims seem to disappear, but new ones emerge and the cultural values are all the time appreciated. The aims and values constitute a part of the vision of the world accepted by the members of a given cultural community. In such a context, we can understand the handiness of tools as their optimum quality in facilitating the achievement of the aims which maintain the current cultural values, and so the existence of a given culture. The second answer links handiness with fulfilling the requirements of the human body. When considering the body in terms of its biological categories (as an organism) we can bear in mind its universal characteristics such as limbs, height, differences in body measurements, etc. In such a context, Martin Heidegger's handiness can be understood pragmatically, as the features of a tool when adjusting it to the human body. In this paper, I propose a thesis that contemporary design loses handiness of the first type, while concentrating on making tools more and more comfortable for the human body. The cultural aims and values traditionally recognized in a given culture lose their priority, or seem to be ignored. At the same time, every tool user is given a chance to develop handiness of the first type. Whether we use this opportunity or not is another problem.

KEYWORDS

tool; the handiness of tools; Martin Heidegger; design; beyond practical values; bodily comfort; everyday aesthetics

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In my paper, I would like to analyse the process that has resulted in changes in the way the human body is treated in a culture, using the example of design. The art of design has always been linked with practical activities, in which various tools are used.¹ The utilitarian character of tools seems obvious. It is also known that one of the origins of design was the practice of decorating tools, which can be observed in every culture regardless of its level of development. Decorative elements meant adding extra features to utilitarian ones, with the practical aspects of the tools being the most important. Let us consider how to understand statements such as *tools are practical* and how to measure their degree of practicality. The obvious points of reference are the requirements and abilities of the human body; at least, this is how the problem of practicality for tools is seen nowadays. However, is this the only dimension of practicality for tools? The history of design shows the development from decorating the surface of tools and an interest in their aesthetic qualities, towards an emphasis on comfort while using them. Let us try to apply the same statements to the human body; *i.e.* let us treat it as a perfect tool, an unattainable ideal for other tools. The development of design with reference to the body would then progress from decorating the body itself to its becoming an autonomous value reaching fulfilment in its comfort of usefulness.

In analysing this problem I would like to refer, not so much to Martin Heidegger's philosophy, but to some of his deliberations which characterise implements in a very evocative way. In his work *Being and time*, he says:

A useful thing is essentially 'something in order to...'. The different kinds of 'in order to', such as serviceability, helpfulness, usability, handiness, constitute a totality of useful things (Heidegger, 1996: 64).

What is really important for my considerations is the fact itself of forming the question about the thing's purpose, 'What is it for?', which can be asked with reference to any tool in expectation of a specific description of the discovered sense of usefulness. It is a general question about the sense of an implement; however, we must remember that every useful thing has its own handiness. Heidegger gave the example of glasses as a perfectly handy tool:

For someone who, for example, wears spectacles which are distantly so near to him that they are 'sitting on his nose', this useful thing is further away in the surrounding world than the picture on the wall across the room. This useful thing has so little nearness that it is often not even to be found at all, initially (Heidegger, 1996: 99).

To complement the above quotations, let us remember the fact that Heidegger understood implements also as symptoms, signs and symbols, and then

¹ A comprehensive study of the term 'design' was presented by Janusz Krupiński (1998).

the idea of practicability can be perceived in a broader sense, and not only limited to material tools. In such a broad interpretation we notice two meanings, which, I feel, should be separated. They both refer to ways of characterising tools in different cultures.

Every culture uses implements, which are handy — using the terminology of the German philosopher. Let us ask: Handy with reference to what? At least two answers are possible. The first one constitutes the basis for one interpretation of handiness. It means, in accordance with Heidegger's suggestion, the tool's ancillary nature with reference to values that are beyond practical (higher), which creates sense for both material tools (simply objects) and those which are mental structures (words, signs, symbols, *etc.*).

The handiness of implements in such a context can be understood as the extent to which their optimal feature facilitates the achievement of their intended goals. If the goals are selected from beyond practical values and evaluative ideas, the implements are ancillary with reference to them — a prayer or the text of a Gospel is ancillary with reference to Christian values; while scientific theories are ancillary with reference to the value of getting to know the world. Incense in religious rituals, or knight's armour in a medieval battle, are also ancillary with reference to some higher values (that are more important than a man). The nature of implements, in Heidegger's interpretation, accurately describes the process of cultivating cultural values by means of achieving the goals they define. When reached, the goals seem to vanish, but new ones appear and the cultural values are preserved. Thus, they constitute a part of the vision of the world of a cultural community. Using these lines of reasoning lets us consider the human body as a physical object, which is handy with reference to higher cultural values such as justice, honour, happiness, *etc.* Examples of such an instrumental treatment of the human body can be found in Michel Foucault's works. I would like to refer to his texts in order to point out his model of the original ways of administering justice and punishment, which concentrated on the body. With the passage of time, starting from the Enlightenment period, the ways of inflicting punishment changed, at least in Europe.

My considerations do not require an in-depth analysis of Foucault's philosophy, or the philosophy of corporeality. I merely want to concentrate on certain procedures concerning the body which are substantiated by the French philosopher and use the culture-related content of his works. Foucault, in his text entitled *The body of the condemned* (Foucault, 2008: 253–259), points to an important change in the penal system. This system originated in the eighteenth century, and Foucault describes the execution of Robert-François Damiens in 1757, who was convicted of attempted regicide. His punishment involved being beaten in public, covered in molten lead, burned with sulphur, having his bones broken and his limbs cut off. Then his trunk and limbs were burnt and the ashes were scattered to the winds. Foucault remarked that for

a long time, the human body was the focus of penal repression. At the end of the eighteenth century, punishment meant long hard labour with a minimal amount of food and drink. Foucault noticed that then: 'the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared' (Foucault, 1995: 8); and 'From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights' (Foucault, 1995: 11). The judiciary system no longer focused on inflicting pain upon the body, but on the inevitability of punishment addressing the soul. Obviously, for the last two hundred years, the process of penalisation has evolved from punishing the body to punishing the mind, in the form of isolation or of being deprived of one's property or rights. In analysing the changes in the penalty system, Foucault demonstrated an increasing concern for the body or, to be more precise, the emergence of the subjectivity of the body, which resulted in imposing a penalty on the soul.

Similar cultural changes occurred outside prisons, and thus not only the bodies of the condemned were tools for realising social ideals. Let us remember, for example, that it was not until the beginning of the last century when body comfort and pragmatism led to the disappearance of the corset [Photos No. 1, 2].

Today, underwear and clothes are cultural tools, by means of which we can manifest our attitude, interests and personality. But this does not happen at the cost of physical pain.

In historical times, before the above-mentioned change, it used to be generally accepted that physically weaker female bodies were expected to undergo certain rigours, one of which was using frames in their clothing. This was seen as a way of enforcing some discipline on an imperfect mind by means of imposing a variety of restrictions upon the body. The corset was considered a perfect tool for modelling a weak body. Known almost since the Middle Ages, it was only at the end of the eighteenth century that the corset led to permanent figure deformation, rib dislocations and reductions of the volume of the stomach and lungs. This was the result of satisfying a cultural requirement — to have a very slim waist. An appropriately shaped female body signified a higher social status. It was only when X-rays became popular that doctors managed to prove the harmful effects of wearing a corset for a long period of time.

Similar rigours were applied to the male body. In European culture, a knight's armour was the tool used for achieving the ideals of heroism, bravery, the defence of personal honour and the honour of the homeland. Battle armour was definitely pragmatic in its character, but tournament armour was a cultural tool and, like a corset, signified a higher social status [Photos No. 3, 4]. Both of these tools were uncomfortable and restricted the natural movement of the body, as well as its development and biological functions. The body itself was subordinate to the recognition of symbolic values and thus it was considered inferior to those values, or more like an object.

Clothes worn by the lower classes were also uncomfortable, mainly because of the materials used — heavy, densely-woven woollen fabrics. In Poland, with its moderate climate, peasants' clothes were meant to protect a person from cold, rain or snow, rather than from heat. Woollen corsets, skirts and aprons were layered over linen slips, one on top of another, on the hips as well as the shoulders. A complete woman's folk costume ultimately formed at the end of the nineteenth century could weigh between 25 and 35 kg [Photo no. 5] and a man's costume was equally heavy.

Gradual but systematic changes which occurred in both the symbolic and technical culture (*i.e.* civilisation²) led to the production of lighter and more comfortable garments. Let us consider contemporary military uniforms. They are ergonomic, light and made of fabrics with the highest technical parameters, and are designed with the anatomy and comfort of their users in mind. The same is true for women's underwear. Even though it may work to shape the figure, it is the body, treated as the subject not the object that matters. What is important is the comfort of the user and the lightness of the clothes.

Another example of a tool realising a cultural sense is the iron. Once heavy and inconvenient, it was used to keep clothes in impeccable condition. Linen, cotton and silk pieces of clothing required constant washing, stiffening and ironing [Photos No. 6, 7].

Nowadays, clothes reflect a personality or an attitude and an iron, if necessary at all, is ergonomic and handy. Generally speaking, today our bodies are not restricted by, or exposed to, the same degree of discomfort and pain as two hundred years ago.

Glasses can serve as another example. The first glasses improved visual acuity, but were uncomfortable to use. Often you had to hold them in front of your eyes with one hand. Later lenses were put into heavy metal or horn frames [Photos No. 8, 9, 10, 11].

Today, the development of optics has ensured us the comfort of perfect vision thanks to corrective lenses, and frames have become very light and durable. Contact lenses, unnoticeable for both the user and the observer, seem to be an example of the perfect glasses. One of the most renowned designers, Philip Starck, designed glasses whose arms are constructed in a way that resembles the human shoulders. They can be moved and rotated in all directions and planes, which ensures their durability and does not restrict the user's behaviour. The human body was the inspiration for his design.

Shoes are another commonly-used tool. As recently as in the nineteenth century, right and left shoes looked identical. Anatomical differences between

² I am referring here to the theory of culture of Jerzy Kmita, who distinguishes between symbolic culture in a broader and narrower sense, and technical culture — civilisation — and emphasizes their complementary character.

the right and left foot were not taken into consideration. Heels were positioned on the foot axis so that the weight of the body rested on the toes. It was only just over a hundred years ago that the heels in shoes were repositioned. As a result, the body weight is now evenly distributed and the shoes are comfortable; at least, they should be. It is sports shoes which are really comfortable, as aspects such as anatomy, cushioning and ventilation have all been taken into account by the designers and technologists.

All of the above examples illustrate the shift in attitudes towards the body, which has gained an autonomous value, with both designers and producers aiming to satisfy its needs and requirements. Analysing the human body from its biological categories (as an organism) we can consider its universal, but at the same time individualised, characteristics. In the case of glasses, those characteristics are the individual sight defect or the shape of the eyeball. In the case of clothes or shoes, designers take into consideration the size of the feet and limbs, the height, the body measurements, *etc.* It can be said that Heidegger's handiness has changed its point of reference — it is no longer subordinated to higher, beyond practical values but is ancillary to the body, which has been substituted for those values. Handiness has transformed from serving a symbolic value into being subordinate to the body, which in the art of design has evolved into a value with its own merit. This transformation is reflected in American pragmatism, which accentuates the adjustments to an individualised human body as one of a tool's characteristics.

In contemporary culture, our bodies have gained more autonomy and recognition. The first type of tools, difficult to use and uncomfortable, have disappeared. Also, their aims have changed. Clothes are designed to reflect our personality and not our level of affluence. They are often made from ecological or recycled fabrics of the highest standards and do not need ironing. Designers focus on tools which are more and more comfortable for the human body. The cultural aims and values observed in a given culture have lost their priority, or been completely forgotten. At the same time, what has grown in importance is the object itself — the tool or implement, its handiness and its aesthetics in terms of individual perception. Every tool user is provided with an opportunity to include it in their own individualised auto-creative narration. Banal tools are given an individual sense. They can be found in pro-ecological narrations, physical activities or in solidarity with communities suffering from armed conflicts. They can also valorise consumption. Whether we use this opportunity or not is another issue.

The examples I have presented illustrate the thesis that it is only within the Enlightenment of European culture that the human body stopped being ancillary, or handy with regard to punishment or generally accepted social norms. More or less at that time, the status of the body changed from being an object-like tool into a subject whose subjectivity is realised through tools which serve

the body, and then the utilitarian function of a tool with regard to the human body was established. In my opinion, such a context has become the source of inspiration for contemporary design. Modern technological advances enable designers to realise almost every project which is energy-efficient, functional and expected to make daily life easier. Designers are also involved in the process of designing orthopaedic equipment and articles for the disabled. These are further examples of Heidegger's handiness. It seems that the universally accepted subjectivity of the body today has generated an autotelic culture value in the form of a mythology of comfort and luxury, which often clashes with widespread standardisation.

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Elżbieta STANISZEWSKA, *The human body: From its instrumentality...*



1. Corset, about 1910, needle lace, machine sewing, 69 cm long,
MNK XIX-11304 (National Museum in Kraków)



2. Corset, about 1910, needle lace, machine sewing, 69 cm long,
MNK XIX-11304 (National Museum in Kraków)

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3. Armour, dating back to the turn of the fifteenth/sixteenth century. Its weight is 24.5 kg, MWP/1384 (Museum of the Polish Army in Warsaw)



4. Tournament armour, about 1560, wrought and etched, MNK V-4319 (National Museum in Kraków)



5. Folk costume, Radom region, nineteenth century:
skirt, MWR/TK 8653; blouse, MWR/TK 6961; corset, MWR/TK 2260;
waist-tied apron (worn on skirt), MWR/TK 753/5468;
apron worn over shoulder, MWR/TK 1048/5932;
'Szalinówka' kerchief, MWR/TK/123/34369
(Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej)



6. A charcoal iron from the end of the nineteenth century, from the collection of the Museum of Radom Village, MWR/KM-9582 (Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej)



7. A slug-heated iron from the end of the nineteenth century, from the collection of the Museum of Radom Village, Inventory No. MWR/KM-8127 (Muzeum Wsi Radomskiej)



8. Glasses in a metal folding frame, eighteenth/nineteenth century, originally belonging to Wojciech Wielątko (the author of popular cookery books), MJM/H/15/1442 (Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom)



9. "Lorgnette" glasses in gold-plated metal, 1900–1920, from the collection of Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom, MJM/H/2985/114/03 (Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom)



10. "Lorgnon" glasses with a tortoiseshell handle, 1918–1939, from the collection of Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom, MJM/H/2984/113/03 (Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom)



11. Glasses in a metal frame, 1918–1939, from the collection of Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom, MJM/H/4100/321/10 (Jacek Malczewski. Museum in Radom)