# The Car as Self: Aesthetic Judgement and Cognitive Extension in Automotive Design Over the Past Century

Aditi Choudhary

**Abstract**

This essay explores the evolution of automotive design as a reflection of shifting philosophical notions of beauty, selfhood, and cognition. Drawing upon Immanuel Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment and the extended mind thesis, it contends that cars transcend their utilitarian function, serving as extensions of the human self. As both aesthetic objects and cognitive environments, automobiles embody the tension between form and function, autonomy and automation, while mirroring cultural and philosophical transformations. By interpreting car design as a dynamic manifestation of identity, this essay argues that cars are philosophical artifacts—embodied symbols of human thought, experience, and self-conception.

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# Kantian Aesthetics and the Automobile

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) stands as one of the most important works in modern aesthetic theory, providing a framework for understanding the nature of beauty and aesthetic judgment. Kant's theory of aesthetics has profound implications for how we engage with objects in the world, particularly how we evaluate beauty. According to Kant, aesthetic judgments are rooted in feelings of pleasure or displeasure, yet they possess a universal claim. When we deem an object beautiful, we expect others to share our judgment, despite the fact that beauty is not grounded in logical reasoning or empirical evidence. This universality distinguishes aesthetic judgments from mere subjective preference. Instead of being motivated by personal interest, Kant argues that we experience beauty through what he terms *disinterested pleasure*—a pleasure that arises without any concern for the object's utility, purpose, or practical value (Ginsborg 2022).

Kant's aesthetics also revolves around the idea of "purposiveness without purpose." This refers to the notion that beautiful objects appear to be perfectly suited to their form, as though they were designed with an inherent intention or purpose, even though this purpose is not practical or functional in nature. The beauty of the object is perceived in its form alone, independent of its utility. For Kant, beauty emerges from a harmonious "free play" between the imagination and understanding, where the mind freely engages with the form of the object, finding pleasure in the ease and balance of this interaction. The object does not need to serve any functional or material need to be appreciated aesthetically; instead, it provides an aesthetic experience that transcends practicality.

This concept becomes particularly interesting when applied to cars, which are clearly functional. Their primary function, their *purpose*, is transportation. Yet, aesthetic appreciation can operate independently of this function. When someone admires the graceful curve of a Porsche 911 or the sculptural boldness of a Lamborghini Countach, the pleasure they experience may not stem from what the car *does*, but from how it *looks*. In that moment of aesthetic contemplation, the viewer is engaging with the form as if it were autonomous, as if the car's design had a kind of inner necessity that is pleasurable in itself. Even though the car has a purpose, our aesthetic appreciation becomes disinterested in that purpose, aligning with Kant's framework. The pleasure is in the form, not in the utility.

Applying this to automotive design, particularly in the early to mid-20th century, reveals how cars became aesthetic artifacts. Consider the sweeping lines of a 1937 Delahaye 135MS (see fig. 1), or the futuristic tailfins of a 1959 Cadillac Eldorado (see fig. 2). These designs evoke aesthetic pleasure not simply because they are efficient or well-engineered, but because they express a visual language of speed, elegance, or optimism. Cars like the Jaguar E-Type (see fig. 3) or the Citroën DS (see fig. 4) were celebrated not only for their performance but for their formal beauty. They carried a visual rhetoric that resonated across cultures, eliciting judgments of taste that transcended functionality. In this sense, cars became the 20th century's most accessible form of mobile sculpture.

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Figure 1. 1937 Delahaye 135MS (Photograph by Peter Harholdt, Revs Institute, https://museum.revsinstitute.org/the-collection/delahaye/#gallery-1)

Figure 2. 1959 Cadillac Eldorado (Photograph by Gabor Mayer, Hyman Ltd., https://hymanltd.com/vehicles/5485-1959-cadillac-eldorado-biarritz-convertible/)

Figure 3. 1961 Jaguar E-Type (Photograph by Tom Gidden, RM Sotheby's, https://www.hagerty.co.uk/articles/opinion/is-the-jaguar-e-type-the-most-overhyped-car-britain-built/)

Figure 4. 1968 Citroën DS (Photograph by Citroën DS Manufaktur, https://www.citroen-ds-manufaktur.com/angebot.php?anr=50&lang=en)

In many ways, these cars also reflected the aesthetic ideals of the societies that produced them (Volti 1996). American cars emphasized excess, luxury, and spectacle, mirroring a postwar culture of abundance. European cars often highlighted craftsmanship, performance, and restraint, echoing more traditional, artisanal values. Thus, the aesthetics of cars also became a canvas for cultural identity. Car design can be seen as a nationalized language of form, signaling aspirations, anxieties, and ideologies of the time. In fascist Italy, for example, streamlined forms emphasized speed and power as metaphors of state control. In postwar Japan, compact cars spoke to resourcefulness and urban renewal.

The rise of mass production further democratized aesthetic judgment. With Henry Ford's assembly line came not only affordable vehicles but a shift in aesthetic expectations (Lamm 1990). The functional became beautiful in its own right, giving rise to a modernist ethos where the sleek, minimal, and efficient held aesthetic power. The Bauhaus ideal—where form follows function—filtered into automotive styling, reinforcing Kant's notion of purposiveness without purpose (Griffith 2016).

For Kant, the beauty of these automobiles, much like other aesthetic objects, lies in the harmonious interaction between form and understanding. The car's design engages the viewer's imagination, sparking a sense of aesthetic pleasure that is free from any practical concerns. It is a pleasurable experience that results from the balance and proportion inherent in the object's form. Kant's aesthetics encourage us to recognize and appreciate the beauty in objects—whether functional or not—not because they serve any practical function, but because they provide a pure aesthetic experience.

Applying Kant's aesthetics to automotive design provides a rich and nuanced way to understand how car design transcends its utilitarian function to become an aesthetic experience. Through the lens of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, we can see how automobiles have evolved into objects of beauty, engaging the viewer's imagination and understanding in ways that elicit universal pleasure. Cars, like works of art, are appreciated not solely for their functionality but for their form, their balance, and their ability to provide a disinterested aesthetic experience. The car's form, in this Kantian framework, reveals a deeper

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philosophical engagement with the interplay of beauty, function, and cultural meaning, making the automobile a fascinating subject of aesthetic inquiry.

**The Extended Mind and Embodied Cognition**

While Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory helps us grasp the sensuous and symbolic beauty of automobiles, cognitive science offers a complementary perspective—one that addresses not how cars look, but how we think with and through them. The car, from this angle, is not just a designed object or a cultural symbol. It is a site of cognition itself.

At the heart of this perspective lies the extended mind thesis, formulated by philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers in their seminal 1998 paper, "The Extended Mind." According to their argument, cognition does not stop at the boundaries of the brain or even the body. Instead, it extends into the environment, encompassing the tools, technologies, and social systems that participate in the processes we typically associate with "thinking." If one uses a notebook to remember facts or a smartphone to navigate a city, those tools become, in a functional sense, part of their cognitive apparatus. They are not simply aids; they are integrated extensions of thought (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

This theory is especially resonant when applied to the act of driving. Consider navigating through heavy city traffic or along a winding mountain pass. These are not merely exercises of rational calculation or muscle coordination. They involve a constant loop of perception, prediction, and responsive action that merges body, machine, and environment into a unified system. Over time, drivers develop what cognitive scientists refer to as a body schema that incorporates the car into their perceptual and motor systems (de Vignemon et al. 2021). Experienced drivers don't have to consciously calculate the width of their car when turning into a tight parking spot; they intuitively "feel" its dimensions. The tires become tactile extensions of the feet, the steering wheel an extension of the hands. The car becomes what phenomenologists call a transparent tool, not invisible, but no longer a separate object of attention. It becomes an integrated medium through which perception and action unfold.

This phenomenon illustrates a form of embodied cognition: the idea that our mental life is grounded in bodily interaction with the world. Driving is a prime example of this. When we are immersed in the act, we often enter what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms a "flow state", a condition where action and awareness merge, where self-consciousness fades and time seems to warp. In these moments, the boundary between driver and vehicle dissolves. The car becomes a conduit for expressive movement and intuitive engagement. Like a violinist with their instrument or an athlete with their gear, the driver does not merely control the car—they *become* it (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Such cognitive embodiment extends beyond function into the realm of identity and expression (Zande 2007). Cars serve as powerful symbols of selfhood. A rugged SUV may communicate resilience and independence, a luxury sedan symbolizes refinement and authority, and a compact electric vehicle demonstrates environmental consciousness and modern minimalism. They are not only modes of transport but icons of lifestyle, value systems, and aspirational narratives. The act of customizing a car—altering its engine, paint, rims, or interior—mirrors practices of self-fashioning seen in clothing, music, or home design. Cars thus operate as prosthetic selves: second skins that project and shape identity within social space (Hester and Hehman 2023). This is especially evident in the way automotive cultures diverge

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globally, with some emphasizing power and status, and others prioritizing efficiency, charm, or ecological harmony. In this way, cars become moving expressions of cultural scripts. Each modification, brand choice, or model preference tells a story not just about the individual, but about the values of the society they navigate.

This symbolic and functional extension of the self through the automobile is steeped in cultural narratives. In postwar America, cars symbolized freedom, masculinity, and consumer power. They featured prominently in films, music, and advertising as emblems of personal autonomy and success. The muscle car era of the 1960s and '70s—dominated by vehicles like the Ford Mustang (see fig. 5)—translated raw mechanical power into a language of rebellion and individuality (Richardson 2022). These cars weren't just transportation—they were declarations of identity, stitched into the mythology of the open road and the rugged individual. Conversely, in Japan, the rise of small, efficient cars during the same period reflected a radically different set of values rooted in spatial pragmatism, environmental sensitivity, and technological innovation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unique phenomenon of Kei cars (short for *keijidōsha*, or "light automobiles") . Introduced in the aftermath of World War II, Kei cars were a governmental response to the need for affordable, compact vehicles that could navigate Japan's narrow streets and dense cities (Radu 2012). But beyond their utilitarian beginnings, Kei cars, such as the Honda N360 (see fig 5.), have evolved into a cultural symbol of their own. In both cases, vehicles carried meanings far beyond their engineering.

Figure 5. A 1968 Ford Mustang and 1967 Honda N360 (https://www.rrs-online.com.au/car/67-68-mustang-performance-parts, https://www.autoevolution.com/cars/honda-n360-1967.html#aeng_honda-n360-1967-04 )

Sociologist Roland Barthes (1972) once described the automobile as a "modern myth," an object that circulates in a semiotic economy of signs and fantasies. For Barthes, the car was not merely a machine but a poetic object imbued with dream, desire, and ideology. The extended mind thesis pushes this further by suggesting that the car doesn't merely *represent selfhood* or cognition—it actively *constitutes* it. Driving is not just symbolic or instrumental, it is cognitive, embodied, and *lived*.

The automobile also reshapes the broader cognitive ecology in which we exist. "Cognitive ecology" refers to the larger system of tools, environments, and practices that shape how we think and act. Cars contribute to this in countless ways (Hutchins 2010). Road networks, traffic signage, GPS navigation, dashboard interfaces, and even music playlists coalesce into a dynamic, externalized architecture of thinking. For example, GPS systems have changed how we remember spatial layouts. Where once drivers relied on internal maps and visual cues, many now depend on algorithmic prompts. This outsourcing of navigation alters cognitive development and memory, subtly changing how we experience and remember places.

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As car technology advances, the fusion of mind and machine becomes even more intimate. Semi-autonomous systems such as adaptive cruise control, lane-keeping assist, or voice-activated infotainment shift cognitive tasks from human to machine. These systems do not simply enhance driving, they reshape it. The division of labor between human and vehicle becomes fluid, and with it, questions of agency and responsibility arise. In a fully autonomous vehicle, the human is no longer a driver in the traditional sense but a participant in a distributed cognitive system. Decisions about speed, route, and safety are made not by a person but by algorithms trained on vast datasets.

This evolution invites philosophical scrutiny. If cognition is extended to include digital agents, where do we draw the boundary of the self? If an autonomous car makes a moral decision in a split-second traffic scenario, who is ethically accountable? These are no longer science fiction hypotheticals but urgent design and legal challenges. The extended mind framework offers a compelling way to approach them: seeing human and machine as co-agents within shared systems of cognition and responsibility.

Urban infrastructure increasingly reflects this model. Smart intersections, predictive traffic systems, and vehicle-to-infrastructure communication networks are designed not just for efficiency but to harmonize with human cognitive patterns. Highways and cities become interactive environments, co-constituted by technology and thought. In this context, the automobile becomes a node in a massive, ambient thinking system, one that links minds, machines, and environments in real-time feedback loops.

The car is not just an instrument we use, it is a space we inhabit cognitively and emotionally (Li 2020). It extends our minds, mediates our identities, and transforms our environments. It is a hybrid of muscle and memory and of body and code. The philosophy of cognitive science allows us to understand cars not merely as objects but as processes—ongoing enactments of human beings in the world. And few technologies illustrate this interweaving of tool, self, and system as vividly or as consequently as the automobile.

**From Muscle to Mind: The Phenomenology of Automotive Design**

Having traced the evolution of automotive design from its aesthetic to its cognitive dimensions, we now turn to its broader cultural and philosophical implications. This section considers how those transformations reflect deeper shifts in the meaning of human agency, freedom, and technological being. The automobile, long celebrated as an icon of power, freedom, and modernity, now finds itself at a philosophical crossroads. The cultural and cognitive shifts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have not only transformed the way cars are built and driven, but the deeper meanings they embody. Once forged in the language of force—muscle, chrome, combustion—cars increasingly speak in a vocabulary of minimalism, seamlessness, and digital abstraction. This evolution is not merely aesthetic; it reflects a more fundamental reorientation in our modes of being, knowing, and valuing. The car, as an artifact, becomes a lens through which we can trace the shifting contours of human subjectivity in an age of ecological crisis and technological acceleration.

Take, for instance, Teslas. Its stripped-down interior—a single touchscreen, the near-erasure of tactile controls—does not signify an absence of design, but a shift in what design is *for* (see fig. 6). The visible machinery of the past gives way to the invisible logic of interface. Luxury is redefined not through material excess but through informational clarity. The driver no longer grips an instrument of propulsion; rather, they engage with a computational system, navigating through code as much as through space. In

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this sense, the car becomes less a vehicle than an extension of the digital lifeworld, a mobile node in the network of the cloud.

Figure 6. Tesla Model Y Interior (https://cars.usnews.com/cars-trucks/tesla/model-y/2022/photos-interior)

This new aesthetic—smooth, monochromatic, algorithmically optimized—is not accidental. It corresponds to a broader cultural transformation in how we relate to time, nature, and the self. The sleek form of the electric vehicle, often devoid of ornamental flourish, gestures toward a quasi-Kantian ideal: a kind of *purposiveness without purpose* that foregrounds formal harmony over brute utility. But where Kant's aesthetics sought a universality grounded in subjective freedom, contemporary car design emerges within a context of ecological determinism and algorithmic constraint. The design must be aerodynamic, efficient, recyclable. Beauty becomes the afterimage of optimization. This redefinition of beauty marks not only a technical adaptation but a moral and metaphysical one

Here, we encounter a philosophical paradox: the car, historically a symbol of freedom and agency, increasingly becomes a site of automation and surveillance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the advent of autonomous vehicles. If one does not drive, but is driven, by software, sensors, satellite data, what becomes of the self that once found expression in the act of driving? What remains of the romantic ideal of mastery over machine, of road as metaphor for existential choice?

To understand what is at stake in this shift from freedom to automation, we can turn to phenomenology. From a phenomenological perspective, driving has long been a paradigmatic case of embodied intentionality, a lived synthesis of perception, action, and world. The driver does not merely operate a machine; they *become* the machine. The car is incorporated into the body schema; its boundaries blur with those of the self. Maurice Merleau-Ponty might describe this as an "extension of the lived body," where control and cognition emerge not from conscious calculation, but from a pre-reflective familiarity with the environment (Gallagher 1986). In this sense, the car is not just a tool but a medium of existential navigation, a prosthesis of freedom. The rise of autonomous design challenges this existential intimacy. The steering wheel, once an emblem of agency, becomes a relic. The car transforms from an expressive vessel to a sealed capsule, a moving room abstracted from tactile engagement. In such a world, can Kant's notion of *disinterested pleasure* survive? Or does the aesthetic dimension yield entirely to the utilitarian logic of optimization, convenience, and safety?

The stakes are not merely stylistic. They are metaphysical. For much of the 20th century, the automobile functioned as a symbolic condensation of modernity itself: speed, conquest, individualism.

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The muscle car, the sports coupe, the highway cruiser were avatars of the will, embodiments of a techno-libidinal energy aimed at the horizon. But in the age of climate collapse, this heroic imaginary is no longer tenable. The car's carbon footprint casts a long shadow across its mythos. We no longer gaze at the automobile with Promethean awe, we scrutinize it with ethical ambivalence.

And so design adapts. The aesthetic language of contemporary automotive design increasingly draws from ecological minimalism: biodegradable materials, soft palettes, modular architectures (Brady 2024). Form no longer flaunts its power; it whispers its compliance. This is a new kind of beauty, not the sublime of the open road, but the quiet poise of integration with planetary limits. It is a beauty that reflects not dominion over nature but harmony with it. In this sense, automotive design becomes an ethical project, a material articulation of care.

Yet even within this ethic of restraint, desire persists. The car remains, stubbornly, a symbol of selfhood. Its design is not only about performance or sustainability but about meaning. One's car is often experienced as an extension of personal identity, even when shared or autonomous. The phenomenology of materials—the texture of a steering wheel, the acoustics of a cabin, the temperature of ambient lighting—shapes how one feels, acts, and perceives. As we move into a future of car-as-service, where ownership yields to access, design must compensate for the erosion of uniqueness. It must create effective depth within systems of interchangeability.

This is not mere decoration; it is metaphysical stitching. In a world increasingly disenchanted by abstraction and automation, the sensuous qualities of design may be the last bastion of existential resonance. The feel of space, the rhythm of movement, the tone of silence, these become the new parameters of automotive meaning. In this, we glimpse a return to Kant, albeit in transformed guise: the aesthetic experience as a free play of imagination and understanding, a reconciliation of form and mind, even if now mediated by silicon and satellite. We are thus witnessing a philosophical reconfiguration of the car, not as an obsolete relic of industrial modernity, but as a shifting mirror of cognitive and cultural evolution. The journey from muscle to mind, from combustion to code, is not simply technological. It is ontological. The car remains, as it has always been, a metaphor for the self. Only now, that self is distributed, data-driven, ethically burdened, and aesthetically recalibrated.

In the design of future vehicles, we will not merely confront questions of mobility or function, but of human flourishing. What kind of spaces will these machines offer us? What kind of rhythms, attentions, and sensibilities will they cultivate? What visions of the good life will they materialize? These are not questions for engineers alone. They are questions for philosophers, artists, and all who care about the textures of human existence.

The automobile, once a monument to speed, now becomes a vessel for slowness, reflection, and responsibility. As we relinquish the wheel, we are invited to inhabit the journey anew, not just across landscapes, but within the evolving landscapes of the self. The contemporary automobile reflects not just technological change but a transformation in how humans conceive of agency, ethics, and identity. The movement from muscle to mind is thus not merely an evolution in engineering, but a reconfiguration of the human condition itself.

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## Concluding Thoughts: The Car as a Philosophical Artifact

From the sweeping fenders of Art Deco coupes to the ambient minimalism of modern EVs, the history of automotive design is also a history of the self in flux. Cars are more than machines. They are reflections of how we see ourselves, how we engage the world, and how we imagine what's next. They are designed not only to move through space but to resonate through experience.

By drawing on both Kantian aesthetics and contemporary cognitive science, we see that the automobile is a kind of philosophical artifact, a chimera shaped by the interplay of beauty, function, and thought. It invites us to reflect on how form communicates meaning, and how tools extend the mind. Through Kant's lens, we learn how aesthetic appreciation transcends function, allowing us to find beauty in objects that serve utilitarian purposes. Through the extended mind thesis, we come to understand cars as more than vehicles: they are instruments that alter and expand our cognitive and sensory capacities (Herriot 2018).

The evolution of car design over the past century has also mirrored broader societal transformations. As we moved from the industrial to the digital age, the car has continuously redefined what it means to be modern, efficient, and expressive. Each generation of automotive design incorporates its era's values, ideologies, and aspirations. What once symbolized power and freedom may now signal sustainability and restraint. And as new voices enter the design conversation the aesthetic landscape of mobility continues to diversify.

We are now entering an era where automation, electrification, and digital connectivity are not just reshaping vehicles but reconfiguring our relationships to mobility itself. The car risks becoming invisible, a silent vessel engineered for passive transit. Yet this very moment demands a renewed attention to aesthetics and cognition, precisely because the symbolic power of cars is being redefined. Will their design foster inclusion or reproduce existing inequalities? And can beauty still matter in an age where form is increasingly subordinated to data and code?

The car is, and has always been, a mirror not only of individual identity, but of collective imagination. As such, its design carries the weight of cultural expression, technological mediation, and philosophical significance. To understand the aesthetics of the automobile is to engage in a broader inquiry about who we are, how we think, and what we value. In a world of accelerating change, the car remains a potent site of meaning: an art of motion, a cognitive interface, and a cultural canvas that continues to shape and reflect the contours of the human experience.

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