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Beauty Revisited in Contemporary Art

Současné umění a otázka krásy

Teze

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“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”¹

In his meditations on the arts of Ancient Greece Friedrich Nietzsche touches upon the essence of what makes art what it is. Since I feel that speaking about the essence of things became a possibility again — the post-modern relativism is less fashionable now while at the same time it has opened new hitherto unthinkable possibilities of thought and expression — I take as my starting point some key moments of Nietzsche’s thinking on art in order to get — in the context of modern and contemporary art — an understanding of what makes art still so fundamental to our life today.

Beauty here re-emerges as the main motive. In Nietzsche’s conception of art, beauty is not just an aesthetic category but plays a much more significant role — it is the main and the only criterion of truth. Life for the Greeks, Nietzsche says, was justified only as *an aesthetic phenomenon* — guided by a sense of beauty and aesthetic sensibility — where the question of truth was inseparable from the question of artistic sensibility. This is strikingly illustrated in a passage in the *Odyssey*, depicting the moment when Alcinous understands that Odysseus speaks the truth merely by the beauty of his composing of words, beauty so real that it could not possibly lie: “In your words is a formal beauty to match the graceful order of your ideas.”²

Nevertheless, no matter how ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’ beauty might seem as the constitutive value of art — as may be the case for truth as the constitutive value of knowledge or science, and justice of our social and political life — beauty found itself under philosophical and political attack in the last several decades. Here is the zeitgeist as expressed in Arthur Danto’s words in the late 1980’s:

With the philosophical coming of age of art, visuality drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been.³

1. John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 1919.

2. E. D. Francis, *Image and Idea in Fifth-Century Greece*, Art and Literature after the Persian Wars, Edited by Michael Vickers, London and New York, 1990, p. 96.

3. Danto, Arthur, *After the End of Art*, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995.

Danto here declares authoritatively what we were all presumably supposed to know by then: beauty was of no relevance to the essence of art. He does it with the authority of a physician declaring the death of a patient and uses it to further a claim that there also goes the fate of visuality, dropping away with little relevance to art. All this is announced in the name of ‘the philosophical coming of age of art’ — in the spirit of Hegel — claiming that art as we have known it has ended, and artists are ‘to come of age’, maturing into philosophy, evolving into philosophers.

Beauty was, as we all know, attacked at the beginning of modernity, as part of the modernist re-thinking of all traditional values and of a radical redefining and extending of meanings. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, a major crusade against beauty — colored by a surprisingly moralistic undertone, and promoted, moreover, by the official academic and art establishment — was launched. Beauty, according to Arthur Danto, was not just irrelevant to art — it was actually “immoral”:

.. our societal aversion to beauty has to do with our heightened moral sensitivity. We cannot in good conscience close our eyes and ears to the troubles of our world, but beauty threatens to conceal them.⁴

Such line of reasoning concerned with what might be called the ‘ethics of art’, was introduced, as Nietzsche would certainly insist, by Plato. The Greek way of life as art, where beauty and truth were inseparable, gave way to Plato’s metaphysics of truth and illusion, high and low, light and darkness. Against art, Plato posed the concept of truth reachable merely by reason — thus opening a gap between thought and action, truth and illusion, and thereby introducing reflection, questioning, doubting into life. Plato, that is, (following on his teacher, Socrates) succeeded to convince the Greeks that values were not what they intuitively took them to be and how they lived them — that goodness and truth did not necessarily go hand in hand with beauty and aesthetic pleasure, and that ugliness was in fact not evil, stupid, and inferior as one’s basic intuition would have it (Socrates himself

4. Arthur C. Danto, “Beauty and Morality”, in *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994). pp. 363-375.

known to be extremely ugly). The good and the beautiful from then on was to be constructed by reason, not felt by instincts or experienced by senses. Rationality was offered as a crutch when all certainties of instinct were lost, claims Nietzsche.

The aim of my work is less that of a philosophical treaty trying to, by following on Nietzsche, discredit or refute the general move as expressed by Danto — though my stand against the falsity of Danto's 'prophesy' is evident — but to draw a trajectory both in the history of art (in particular in modern art) and in philosophy through which we can both trace the underpinning of a general move in modern art, as well as in thinking about art, that may have lead to an intellectual atmosphere as presented by Danto — and against that to defend beauty as the constitutive value of art, both, if we wish, philosophically and historically. In so doing, I also examine the logical nature of beauty, or better, what is meant by beauty as a constitutive value in art, and consequently what (necessary) role art plays in our lives. Beauty must be invited back, I argue against Danto — while I also believe that beauty, as a matter of fact, does nowadays make its comeback to the world of art and to the way we perceive and think about art.⁵

With the idea of art as the (true) justification of life, and the imperative to live one's life as if it was a work of art — we touch on the intimate connection between ethics and aesthetics — they are one, both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are quick to remind us.⁶ But here we can already encounter the root of the difficulty in the form of Plato's attack on art — in fact an attack on (illusionary) beauty (what we may today call kitsch) — an attack that in one way or another could be shown to resonate all throughout the history of art, and to form the grounds also for the recent attack on beauty (personified here by Arthur Danto). Beauty is corruptive, it rests on an inferior kind of imitation — it may confuse us to replace that which is true with an inferior useless replica of it — if we want, similar to replacing the genuine hero with an actor playing him or her on stage. Here lies an educational danger of great proportions as the youths may follow not the true heroes but misleading imitators instead. Does Plato actually spell here a final guilty verdict

5. In the last eight years I worked as a curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery in Prague, and experiencing works of present-day art was part of my daily practice.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein: "ethics and aesthetics are one". *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Frank P. Ramsey & C. K. Ogden, trans., Kegan Paul, 1922.

to art? I would argue with Nietzsche that not — and will follow on Nietzsche and his idea of the “eternal recurrence” and the two poles, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the two forces that play out in our life, and are rehearsed in art.

However complex and debatable is the theme of the eternal recurrence in Nietzsche, what matters to our case is the idea of the necessity imbedded in it, i.e. the sense of life tracing a necessity with, if we wish, an inescapable moral. In a way, Nietzsche’s theme here can be read as an imperative by which we must live our life in such manner that had it been repeated, we would embrace our fate and our decisions once again in the same exact way. If art is not imitative of something outside of it — as Plato would insist it should not be — but an exemplification or a rehearsal of a necessity on which a model for a (virtuous) life could be formed — than art is a power without which meaningful life is an impossibility. We stand before a great work of art rehearsing the moves that the artist made, only to realize again and again the inescapable logic of the work — had we to make the moves again, however free in principle we are to alter them, we would have to embrace the necessity of the path that the work and the artist have taken as the only possible way.

But such necessity is only understood in retrospective, when the work is presented in full before us, or when life is encompassed and observed in full view, since each work as each life must present a different new way, by which things stand in a way that we acknowledge as necessary. This prescribes art and life with the imperative of the delivery of what we may call a ‘message’, but a message whose calling is indeed necessary — i.e. it is imperative for it to be delivered (when it is delivered) — it is not a product of a whim of the artist who wants, let us say, to express himself or herself — but an answer to a calling that has a universal bearing, as it is shaped in a given time and context, answering to a general need of a kind. So, if the first claim that the work is making is, namely, (1) this must be expressed, then the second claim that must accompany it, is, (2) there is no other way but the way of the work to deliver what it must deliver. This logic must sit in the core-essence of art, namely, the union of content and form, of the “what” and the “how”.

Here also are in play the Dionysian and the Apollonian poles or powers that Nietzsche introduced, such that in life, if one pole represents the raw power of active and full immersion in life, and the second pole the power of reflection

and ordering, of the giving of form to life, then in life which is meaningful the two poles must play against each other in such way that we find them tailored to each other, weaved into each other, in a unique and singular fashion — as indeed content and form are modeled in great works of art. From here the Greek lesson of art as the justification of life gets its force.

I follow Nietzsche here in acknowledging art as an exercise in exemplification and not of imitation of norms and forms that are located as if ‘outside of the world’ — in Plato’s world of ideas or perfect forms. Here I also follow on Kant and the idea borrowed from his Ethics that in acting we must act as legislators — that in acting we actually legislate a law with a universal bearing — this is the (categorical) imperative that must direct us in choosing a course of action that is viable as a universal law. (Paying with fake money for example will violate such an imperative as it undercuts the very move we make; consider if all people pay with fake money). So if ethics and aesthetics are indeed one, as is true of art, an artist must legislate in the very moves he or she makes the new artistic or aesthetic categories of the time.

The need for a new legislation, what we may call the extension of the established, entrenched norms, does not arise in the name of novelty for its own sake, but of a need of a political or social nature — a need that has a universal bearing. If not, the novelty imbedded in art is an exercise in indulgence and therefore presents no real case of novelty. It is only when the old or current modes of presentation exhaust their role, when they can no longer represent or serve the cause of life properly — when they become in fact tools of oppression or of forcing a way of seeing reality and life that prevents justified change — then the artist must break the old norms and legislate what must become the true meaning of the norms in the tools of the time, thus answering to the pains and needs of his or her time.

I follow a path in modern art, in works of such great legislators as Manet, Schiele, Kandinsky, Magritte, Matisse, and Picasso. Following their role in legislating modern art, thus extending what art and beauty is — I also follow a thread running through modern art that may explain the reason why towards the end of the 20th century we find the sentiment expressed by Danto — backed by what we must admit a powerful establishment of academicians, theoreticians, art critics and bureaucrats — by which beauty and even sheer visuality drop out as irrelevant to art. For if we anchor art and beauty in the tailored unity of content

and form, in the exemplification of a necessity of calling — a demand for, let us say, a liberating new content that finds expression in the only unique possible way or form created to match it — then when strong cultural and intellectual forces focus on separating form from content — as is and was the case in Modernity — we may find down the logical trajectory of things that the very idea of beauty and consequently of art is undermined. It is in this moment of art ‘coming of age’ philosophically, so to speak, (as in Danto’s quote) that we may find that the unique bond — however recreated and reinvented every time afresh — between form and content, signifier and signified, or meaning and reference, is being undermined (as this question surfaces for example in the famous work of René Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*).

Here the success of modern science is also in play. Science — at the least on the technical, basic level — is alien to the very idea of form and content tailored in a singular fashion. Since if we have for example the formal property or definition of an atom, then many such entities, i.e. atoms, must answer to the definition. Science and the practicality of life must be based on generalizations, i.e. law-like entities to which many particulars can answer, as for example all particular chairs answer a practical definition of objects serving the purpose of sitting. In this sense all particulars are the same. But art and its constitutive value, beauty, are anchored in the idea of singularity. If we liken the work of art to a rule or a law-like entity, we find out that unlike in science only a single entity answers to the rule and this is the work itself — the work is both the rule and its unique extension — and it is therefore (truly) singular.⁷

This is indeed the (logical) mark of beauty, that once we see it right, grasp what it is in full, we realize that by virtue of its own unique self-definition and materialization it cannot be but what it is — we must acknowledge it then perfect in accordance with its own standard — i.e. beautiful. This of course means, as indeed Kant argues, that beauty is not a general term — there is no core/stable definition of beauty for which all beautiful things must answer. Beauty is indexical, says Kant, as each work of art presents a newly created standard

7. The notion of “singular rule” as a metaphor for a work of art is developed by Doron Avital in “Art as a Singular Rule”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 41, Spring, 2007.

for what is beautiful. To use Wittgenstein's terminology we can say that "the beautiful" is an open-ended family of such standards of beauty, which is being creatively extended, as can be shown throughout the history of art or beauty for that matter.

Here again we can visit the connection between ethics and aesthetics, since both must refuse the 'rationality' of science and of the 'practicality' of life as they force upon us a world-view of generality. The ethical dilemma would lose its luster and truth, we must admit, if we analyze it as science does, as a repeated scenario that answers to a general definition and prescribes accordingly a pre-established course of action. No says Kant, the hero of the ethical dilemma must legislate every time anew what is just and right — as does the artist who legislates the beautiful every time afresh — answering to the pains and needs of his or her time. The pre-condition to create thus is of course freedom (besides the needed knowledge and skill): only a free autonomous agent — in our case the artist — can extend the rules and legislate what beauty is in a way in which freedom and necessity are one.

A work of art, then, is something that sets its own rules and at the same time answers to those rules — it is a paradigm shift in the face of which one has to re-evaluate one's aesthetic (and ethical) considerations each and every time. It is an extension of the existing standards — going against the literal or expected application of the prescribed rules — re-defining the meanings of things in a way that is true and relevant to the time. The true artist, moreover, must be someone who completely exemplifies the condition he or she lives in, while at the same time acknowledging the legacy of the past and standing responsible before the verdict of the future — not before the verdict of the commentators of the time who follow the latest fashions and trends of the moment.

When face to face with a work of art that answers to the question of the time, we feel — to use Wittgenstein's terminology — "the friction" of the artwork working against the oppression of the established picture of reality that had lost the capacity for a true and fresh description of reality. The "metaphysical comfort" that art offers, which Nietzsche spoke of, is then what we may call the sense of relief of getting rid of the frustration when feeling something is wrong, while you cannot show it and you cannot share it. Moreover, beauty, as a value innate to art, is the voice speaking with the plea for the future, with the eye to the most intelligent, in the hope that

what is true will eventually shine through — it is the refutation of cynicism, and the refutation of kitsch. Beauty is the ‘cultural oxygen’ that we need in order to resist the oppression of any apriori fixed model of reality being imposed on us, i.e. beauty introduces the possibility of change.

So, to conclude, art as the legislator of beauty is a counter force to the modern rationality, to the practicality of life, to calculation, as well as to the dogmatism of modern bureaucracy — securing every time anew the possibility of the singularity and uniqueness of our lives, and thus providing it with truth and meaning. Beauty, furthermore, is something that we cannot compute or calculate, but it in turn guides our lives as an ethical measure. It is a place where we cannot lie — since the beauty of things or the lack of it shows whether they are true or false, and the grace of a conduct or a deed reveals whether right or wrong. We are hence back to where we started, that is, with the Greek idea of *art as the justification of life*. It seems only befitting to conclude here with the words of T. S. Eliot that seem to capture the re-occurring eternal lesson of beauty being legislated/explored every time afresh, so as to validate anew our place in the world. It must be in this that Nietzsche insists that art is truer than metaphysics.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding (Four Quartets)

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