

Towards a Consensus on Beauty

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Until June thirtieth of this year the Jewish Museum in New York City is hosting the Holocaust Exhibition, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery and Recent Art*. As I write the following, I do so with a newspaper photograph before me. It is a photograph of one of the works from the Exhibition, Alan Schechner's *It's the Real Thing: Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*.¹

The photograph is easily available to the mind. Conjure a black and white image of gaunt concentration camp inmates in their bunks, staring at the camera. Add to this the digitally altered image a man before the others, fuller but in like dress holding up a can of Diet Coke.²

Can there be any defense of the artist, say, in sympathy for earnest intentions at demonstration? On the other hand, is the obvious intention to offend all too plain and the gist of the photograph?

How did we get here? When did trivializing the abhorrent warrant public exhibition, become worthy of art, or more «The Real Thing?»

Schechner's entry is not an isolated example of «Shock Art.» Other examples include Robert Mapplethorpe's depictions of sadomasochism, Andreas Serrano's «Piss-Christ,» the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition of «Sensation,» and most recently, Gerhard Richter's focus on the Baader-Meinhoff gang.³

Understood as art, what can and should be said for the world of art if success at offense takes its place alongside or supplants the beautiful? But then what is beauty? How do we come to define it, understand our judgements about it? Given the corpus of Western Aesthetic theory and its claim to the inseparable link between beauty and morality, I believe the question is a significant one.

More exegetical query than conclusion, this brief paper will explore the wonderful challenge awaiting those who teach, supply criticism and dare explore aloud thoughts on beauty.

The task is daunting. That judgements on beauty and morality invite impassioned discourse is fact. Tie this to the contemporary milieu of our heightened caution with language, our sensitivity towards esteem (along with the activism attending both) and any public assertion about what is beautiful muddies the already murky waters of present day aesthetic theory.

We have always argued about beauty. But if a consensus were to be found, I suggest that we would find it in the thoughts about the formal requisites of beauty.

Beginning with the Greeks, we discover measure to be the principal attribute of beauty. Plato wrote: «...the excellence of beauty in every work of art is due to the observance of measure.»⁴ While Aristotle thought that «beauty must have as its elements symmetry, harmony and definiteness.»⁵

Plotinus declared that beauty is symmetrically patterned.⁶ Augustine proposed that beauty is found in mathematical proportion and a fittingness of parts.⁷ Aquinas posited that the «three formal characters of beauty» are clarity, integrity, and proportion.⁸ For Ficino, beauty was «fitting number and measure.»⁹

Commentary upon the formal aspects of the beautiful in Modern thought differs little from Classical thought. From Kant to Schelling, Hegel to Schopenhauer. Dewey to Heidegger, proportion and number, fittingness and measure maintain their place as the principal, definitive quality of beauty.

We find further agreement in traditional commentary when the argument shifts to the moral aspects of beauty.

Ever mindful of the political, Classical Greece was adamant that the beautiful is that which conforms to the moral for education of the citizenry. Statecraft is indeed soul craft.

Can we forget the chapter in *The Republic* wherein Plato inveighs against the Poet? ¹⁰

In his politics Aristotle adds to the argument with his thoughts on the flute: «The flute is not an instrument which is expressive of moral character ... it is too exciting. The proper time for using it is when performance aims not at instruction, but relief of the passions.»¹¹

Linking morality to beauty and thinking them inseparable was not confined to Athens. The same argument was advanced in the Medieval era with an additional import of the Divine and continues in Modern thought with attention to moral goodness.

Plotinus thought beauty, concretized in art, is an imitation of the good.¹² Augustine held that that «the highest aesthetic endeavors are those that attempt to contemplate divine purpose and order.»¹³ For him, «those arts which participate least in the sensible world are mirrors of Divine Order .»¹⁴

Aquinas proposed that «beauty is a mediation of the good.»¹⁵ Ficino claimed «beauty to be the current of communication between God and man, moving from God to the world and the world to God.»¹⁶

In one of the stronger themes of his *Critique*, Kant proposed that form, as an outward expression of the aesthetic idea, is a symbol of moral goodness.¹⁷ While Hegel maintained that the beautiful, manifested in art, formed the lowest rung on the ladder of Absolute Spirit.¹⁸

With link between beauty and morality agreed upon, what then becomes of the player and the audience of the flute? Certainly Aristotle is wrong, or is he? Is stunted morality traceable to devotion or exposure to «non-instructive» instruments, literature and movies? Can the artist and fan of the flute claim its aesthetic worth, apart from purgative benefits, and be right in their judgement?

Are claims of beauty the sovereign of the beholder, the ultimate subjective experience? The question is crucial to any inquiry concerning beauty. For if in a pluralistic society such as ours we cannot form a consensus on what is beautiful, what is to be said for morality?

Would it help us to form a consensus on beauty if the judgements upon it were proven to be universal? Kant held that judgements about beauty are universal. Confusion about this arises from the absence of a distinction between judgements about beauty, which are universal, and those of pleasure, which are subjective:

As regards the pleasant everyone is content that his judgement, which he bases upon private feeling and by which he says of an object that it pleases him, should be limited merely to his own person. Thus he is quite contented that if he says, Canary wine is pleasant, another man may correct his expression and remind him that he ought to say, it is pleasant to me. And this is the taste of the tongue, the Palate, and the throat, but for whatever is pleasant to Anyone's eyes and ears. To one violet color is soft and lovely; to another it is washed out and dead. One man likes wind instruments, another strings. To strive here with the design of reproving as incorrect another man's judgement which is different from our own, as if the judgement were logically opposed, would be folly. As regards the pleasant, therefore, the fundamental proposition is valid. everyone has his own taste.

The case is different with the beautiful. It would, on the contrary, be laughable if a man who imagined anything to his own taste thought to justify himself by saying: this object (the house we see, the coat that person wears, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our judgement) is beautiful for me.¹⁹

Do judgements about beauty then, come down to this Kantian distinction between the personal preference of the pleasing and the objective universal of the beautiful, between what Kant sees as the difference between opinion and truth? Among say, a million judges of beauty, how do we move beyond opinion to truth? What if we reduced the number of judges to two?

Whereas Plato argued strongly against poetry on the grounds of intellectual corruption, Hegel thought poetry to be the universal art of the mind. «Poetry is, however, conformable to all types of the beautiful,» Hegel writes, «its embrace reaches them all for the same reason that the

poetic imagination is its own proper medium, and imagination is essential to every creation of beauty whatever its type may be.»

Similar contention continues today among varied expositors and at all levels.²⁰

In his work *The Western Canon: The Books & School of the Ages*, author Harold Bloom compiles a list of the greatest of the Great Books.²¹ According to what criteria was a work chosen?

In an interview with Charlie Rose on PBS,²² Bloom stated that superlative literature is considered as much owing to aesthetic merit. Asked further if there was a contemporary novel of such merit, Bloom offered that McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* was such a novel.²³ And yet, this same writer is treated with far less sympathy by essayist B. R. Myers.²⁴

In his article «A Reader's Manifesto,» McCarthy's books are criticized roundly for lacking depth and humor.²⁵ With whom do we side and why?

The contention does not stop with literature. If asked whether classical music is more beautiful than jazz, how are we to answer and still preserve the due integrity of the two kinds of music? The response of author and essayist, G.K. Chesterton was clear:

*It (Jazz) is the very reverse of an expression of liberty, or even an expression of license. It is the expression of the pessimist idea that nature never gets beyond nature, that life never rises above life, that man always finds himself back where he was at the beginning, that there is no revolt, no redemption*²⁶

It is certain that the same argument would arise with judgements of film and theatre and paintings. Arguments would surface over the act of judging as well.

Does selection mean repression? Could it be construed as such? Does inclusion yield diluted standards or become lazy relativism? Mindful of history, who would want to stifle expression?

Is there a reasoned to conclusion here or is beauty like love or evil, a mystery truly. Should aesthetic theory yield to, as Santayana says, a sense of the beautiful:

*The sense of beauty has a more important place in life than Aesthetic theory has ever taken in Philosophy. To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to feel it. To have imagination and taste, to love the best, to be carried by the contemplation of nature to a vivid faith in the ideal, all this is more, a great deal more than any science can hope to be.*²⁷

Reading and rereading the above, I come back to my photograph wherein a superimposed figure is holding a Diet Coke can in a Buchenwald bunker and sense something wrong.

NOTES:

1. Eric Gibson, «The Banality of Evil,» *The Wall Street Journal* (New Jersey), 21 March 2002, A20.
2. Ibid.
3. See Eric Gibson's «A Fuzzy View of Terror,» *Wall Street Journal* (New Jersey), 1 March 2002, W11.
4. Plato, «Selections from *Statesman*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics*, eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), trans. Benjamin Jowett, 6.
5. Plato, «Selections from *Symposium*» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 79.
6. Plotinus, «*Ennead I Sixth Tractate: Beauty*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 141.
7. Augustine, «Selections from *De Musica*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. W.F. Jackson Knight, 191.
8. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), trans. Hugh Bredin, 48
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9. Marsilio Ficino, «Selections from *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Sears Reynolds Jayne, 204.
10. Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), trans. Allan Bloom, 277-303.
11. Aristotle, «Selections from *Politics*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 135.
12. Plotinus, *Philosophies*, 140.
13. Augustine, «Selections from *De Ordine*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Robert P. Russell, 172.
14. Ibid.
15. Eco., 37.
16. Ficino, *Philosophies*, 203-4.
17. Immanuel Kant, «Selections from *Critique of Judgment*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. J.H. Bernard, 339-42.
18. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, «Selections from *The Philosophy of Fine Art*,» in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. F.B. Osmaston, 382-445.
19. Kant, *Philosophies*, 287.
20. Hegel, *Philosophies*, 445.
21. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).
22. The Charlie Rose Show, «Bloom Says Shakespeare's Plays Still Surprise,» PBS Television #2745, 10 August, 2000. See also «Harold Bloom Argues Memory, Reading is Key to Thinking,» PBS Television #2723, 11 July, 2000.
23. Ibid.
24. B.R. Myers, «A Reader's Manifesto,» *Atlantic Monthly*, July/August, 2001, 108-111.

25. Ibid.

26. G.K. Chesterton, *Avowals and Denials* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935), 103. The Parentheses are mine.

27. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 1.

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