

## ABSTRACT & Main Inquiries:

What does nothingness mean? It is void, silence, unpretentious, modest, poetry, virtually invisible. If I relate beauty to nothingness, what happens? Is nothingness sort of an absence of beauty? Or it is portrayed by our culture and society, and, in such case, can I define this absence of beauty? Is it beauty that you cannot even catch? Is its appearance neutral, almost hidden?

When we are born, we all have the same degree of beauty and purity, which is progressively lost as long as we start growing up. In a life span, we accumulate wrinkles, and defects and dirt which needs to be concealed in order to fit in certain social categories. But our bodies register all the marks, absorb all the signs and impurities, likewise filters.

We don't necessarily perceive our own dirt or impurities as disgusting, whereas, in the clash with the other, we automatically are ashamed of it. Same way, we tend to regard the other's dirt as disgusting, not our own, very private dirt.

Dirt is matter out of place, so is ugliness. The stain must be cleansed, purified as it represents a threaten for beauty. It is subtracting clean space to beauty. We are part of a society that intimates us to clean up, shape up, hide your -very human- dirt under the carpet. But beauty, nor humanity, would not exist without that dirt. We do absorb impurities all life long. And that is what makes us what we ultimately are: humans. Dirt paradoxically works as a protection: the dirtier we are, the less afraid of getting dirty we will be.

In the society we live in exist many difficulties when it comes to find an identity as humans and a position in it. We are often put in a situation of having to follow: a certain career, a living style, an ideology, somebody's else opinion, what to consume, school systems. Etcetera.

In such a society, and because of this "follower-like", passive position, where we mostly have to repeat the same living patterns, it got harder and harder to retrieve the meaning of things and to understand where we come from. Who we really are. We tend to put on uniforms or masks to fit in different standardized situations. Everything and everybody has to fit in its or his standard place. This way our intrinsic human beauty is concealed and somehow controlled.

With my essay, I try to look under the carpet, undress, unmask and reach a new definition of beauty: a naked beauty, not concealed nor camouflaged. The beauty we all deeply share, unpretentious and honest. A beauty of nothingness: something I see or feel, but about which I keep wondering whether it is or it is not beauty.

To develop such new definition of beauty, I recollect ideas and concepts of beauty from the past, with a main reference to western society: from beauty models in the ancient Greece, Apollonian VS Dionysian, to the Sublime, until the present time. I try to define what purpose and non-purpose beauty is. What is ugliness and dirt and how they both are prerequisites of beauty. I finally take a more personal look upon contemporary society and how its mechanisms define a beauty which is standard. It is starting from a reflexion about standard society and beauty, that I then define a more intrinsic human beauty. Such unequivocal sensation of beauty is extremely subtle, hard to acknowledge: one needs to train one's eyes and go beyond the layers, to discover the beauty of nothingness.

### Area of Interest:

Society, history, philosophy, contemporary art.

### K-words:

Kant, Burke, sublime, apollonian, dionysian, standard society, beauty, ugliness, purification, absence beauty, nothingness.

## **THE BEAUTY OF NOTHINGNESS**

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I.

# 1.

## PURPOSE AND NON-PURPOSE BEAUTY

The purpose of beauty is not only to attract us with certain values, but also that things must be suited to the purpose for which they are intended. In this sense, the philosopher Aquinas would not have hesitated to define a crystal hammer as ugly because, despite the superficial beauty of the material of what is made, the thing would have appeared unsuited to its proper function. (Eco: 2004, 88). So isn't it that things, in order to be beautiful, must have all the parts that rightly belong to them in their more suitable place? Would that be beauty?

Greeks had a strong idea of what beauty is. Their sculptures were used to honor and praise gods. So were their magnificent temples. Every expression of the artist, artisan or poet had to serve a purpose and, at the same time, needed to be very pleasing to the eye.

Greek temples were used for a multitude of things and had their own architectural beauty.

Their designs, concepts, and purpose gave them beauty. The Greeks were masters of art.

Even the dramas and tragedies had their own beauty and also a main purpose, the one of providing the audience with a catharsis, a chance to purge the body of evils and to inoculate in the inhabitants of the Polis a civic sense as well as ideas of justice. Many things the Greeks created or believed in were beautiful. However, some things they thought were beautiful, we do not consider so today. Let's take, for example, utensils. While they have a purpose and can have intricate designs on them, they are not considered to be beautiful by our society today.

People who make toilets, sinks or cement might be esteemed as great artisans to the Greeks because their work has some practical purpose, but we definitely do not consider these workers as artisans. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What we think is beautiful may not be the same as what others think. Greek architecture, sculpture and drama are beautiful as well as various paintings, music and other forms of art that originated later on in history. But I do not feel that anything that has a purpose should be deemed beautiful. Architecture is beautiful to me because there are so many ways you can mix and match shapes, create angles and combine these to make a complex web work of unimaginable style. It is functional and beautiful. Sculpture and paintings are beautiful because not only do they convey what the artist is feeling but they can convey reality, impressions and imagination, while at the same time teaching you about the person that created the art and the times they lived in. I also believe nature in general to be beautiful in the many ways that it creates life and is all around us. We capture its beauty through photography.

The Greeks may not have considered paintings or nature to be beautiful, having no intrinsic value or purpose but might have seen the cave paintings as art because they told a story about that culture.

When someone says the word beautiful I think of things that are pleasing to the eye. I believe beauty can be found by everyone in his or her lifetime. Mostly in different degrees or states. We all have the same degree of beauty when we are born: as babies, we are all beautiful and

pure. Growing up, we all evolve differently and such beauty is lost. There is more difference among individuals and it becomes easier to compare whether one person is beautiful or not. But it is never sure. Sometimes, on the streets, you might see someone gorgeous and you might whisper in your heart, “She’s beautiful!” or “He’s beautiful!” But actually you don’t know why you perceive her/him as beautiful.

One might encounter beauty and think that one object or person or place is beautiful, and this is a very natural reaction. But to explain the reason why that object or person or place is actually beautiful is very complicated. That leaves us in a strange position. Beauty really has to do with the way a person carries it off. When you see beauty, it has to do with the place, with what a person is wearing, the contexts in which people are acting, living, moving.

For instance, jewelry doesn’t make a person more beautiful, but it makes a person feel more beautiful. I remember once an Olympic winner saying during her interview: “When I dress beautiful, I feel confident and my performance gets better”. Beauty has to do with the attitude, with the confidence and with small objects and other fetishes that enhance our self confidence.

In Sweden you might see a beautiful person after another beautiful person and finally you don’t even turn around to look because you realize the next person you see will be just as beautiful as the other ones who went by and that you didn’t bother turning around to look at. In a place like that you can easily get bored of beauty, so that when you see a person who’s not beautiful, that person might look more attractive and desirable to you because he or she is breaking the beautiful monotony. In this case, we look at beauty as a thing or an object. We must stop treating beauty as a thing or quality, and see it instead as a kind of communication. We often speak as if beauty were a property of objects: some people or artworks have it and some do not. But pace Kant and Burke, the judgment of beauty in a person or artwork varies enormously from one person to the next, and in the course of time, even within the same person. These shifts and differences are meaningful and valid, and are not “falling away” from some truth or higher taste. Beauty is an unstable property because it is not a property at all. It is the name of the particular interaction between two beings, a “self” and an “Other”: I find an other beautiful. This act of discovery has profound implications. (Beech: 2009, 46)

When the “self” compares with the “other” who’s more beautiful, how can you prove such beauty? How can you compare and decree who - the self or the other - is more beautiful?

Kant tried to describe our human abilities to perceive and categorize the world around us. There is a complex interplay among our mental faculties including perception, imagination, and intellect or judgment. Kant held that in order to function in the world to achieve our human purposes, we label much of what we sense, often in fairly unconscious ways. After all, there is quite a lot of human agreement that flowers are beautiful and that insect animals are ugly.

Hume tried to resolve this problem by saying that judgments of taste are “intersubjective”. Kant believed that judgments of beauty were universal and grounded in the real world, even though they were not actually “objective”. We typically apply labels or concepts to the world to classify sensory inputs that suit a purpose. Kant’s way of recognizing this was to say that something beautiful has “purposiveness without a purpose”.

We perceive a red rose as a beautiful object. But why a red rose is labeled as “beauty” and an insect animal like a cockroach as “ugly”? It is something about their features, colors and textures. When I see an apple with a beautiful green color and a smooth surface, I desire it.

I am attracted by the features, colors and textures of the apple. But in the moment I'm putting it into my mouth, the aesthetic relation to the apple's beauty dissolves. Kant believed beauty should be the intrinsic and objective property of the thing being considered. This in part fueled the modernist fascination with form and abstraction. But the more the search for the transcendent got wrapped up in the abstract, the further it became removed from ordinary human affairs.

The very concept that there might be something called beauty became an embarrassment. The modernists believed there is nothing universal about taste. To them it is simply a matter of opinion, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and thus does not exist. Beauty got hopelessly entangled in erudite discussions of charm, ornamentation, the proper role of women in society and class. A concern for beauty, modernists feared, could obscure the quest for deep truths, especially the truths concerning the squalor of unliberated society.

Kant, by saying that beautiful objects are purposive, referred to the labeling of an object as beautiful because it promotes an internal harmony or "free play" of our mental faculties; we call something beautiful when it elicits this pleasure. For Kant the aesthetic is experienced when a sensuous object stimulates emotions, intellect, and imagination. A beautiful object's form and detail are the key to the all-important feature of "purposiveness without a purpose". (Beech: 2009, 108-117)

In the story of Psyche and Cupid, the mortal Psyche (the Soul) is married to the divine Cupid (Love), but does not know his identity or even what he looks like. He visits her only in darkness and disappears with the dawn. Psyche's sisters, however, jealous of the riches he has showered to her, claim that he must be a monster and urge her to investigate. So one night, Psyche lights a candle and gazes on her sleeping husband. She has found the opposite of a monster and is so overcome with his beauty that her hand trembles and a drop of burning wax falls on the god's still form, awakening him. Seeing her disobedient, unworthy gaze (she is awed, burning), deserts her, flying up towards the heavens. Psyche grabs on to his leg and is carried up briefly, but she soon falls to earth, for she is a mere mortal. Yearning to be reunited with Cupid's heavenly beauty, she performs a series of superhuman tasks that earn her immortality. She then dwells in heaven as Cupid's equal, and the offspring of their union is a divine child. Pleasure. This myth is a little allegory of aesthetic pleasure, as the soul, moved by beauty, becomes worthy of love and its delights. It might be seen as a friendly amendment to Romanticism as well. Exactly two hundred years ago, William Wordsworth wrote, "We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure". The psyche myth rewrites that maxim: we have no pleasure but what is propagated by sympathy. Sympathy is the product of the interaction that we call beauty, an interaction in which both parties become aligned in value and, in the process, become in some sense equal.(...) Kant warned that enjoyment of beauty was distinct from other sorts of pleasure. (Beech: 2009, 47-48)

# 2.

## BEAUTY FROM THE PAST

Isn't art in general aimed to beauty? Well, it is depending on the different historical periods or matters of subjectivity. Through history, art finally disengaged from its role of representing reality and beauty, thanks to the reflections of many artists and movements expressing various world perceptions, such as Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism etc. Some exponents of the avant-garde movements, like Cézanne, Picasso and Pollock above all, were influenced by Immanuel Kant's view of beauty, which held that the experience of beauty provides a taste of transcendent freedom from the human condition. (Freeland: 15) Avant-gardes gradually developed around 1800, in parallel and in response to the industrial era and abolished traditional styles and changed drastically conventional ideas of beauty. In the years following the revolutions in France and America and after the Romanticism, the Avant-gardes venerated the artist's creative powers; based on their creative talent, artists were held up as a special and sublime class, somehow separate from ordinary mortals. Instead of an imitation (mimesis) of the beauty of nature or of the human body, they achieved new models of beauty, new forms and ways of expression, often inspired by the speed and the mechanization of the new industrial era. According to the avant-garde ethic, the goal was to provide moral and spiritual leadership and to show beauty and meaning for the dawning industrial age. These ideals led to the birth of Modernism in the later 19th century through such movements as Impressionism, Expressionism and Symbolism. Modernism is a concept born in the industrial revolution. It was the expression of an urge to embrace the new realities and materials of the industrial age, and was expressed through literature, art, decorative arts and design. Underlying most of the modernist movements have been earnest efforts at social engineering- utopianism for the new industrial state that was taking shape. Avant-garde artists weren't merely reacting to society with last-ditch efforts at breaking up and dislodging prevalent styles. The notion that the creative powers of the individual artist are at the center of what art is. The artist was now seen as the leading edge, the prophet of new cultural ideas, and this meant that the artist had begun to take more extensive liberties with established ideas of technique, interpretation, and suitable subject matter. Avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm. In terms of what is accepted beauty in a society or group, they are trying to show a new definition of beauty and meaning for the dawning industrial age. (Greenberg: 1939)

Going back to the origins of western culture, the idea of "aesthetic beauty" began to take shape during the rise of Athens to the status of a great military, economic and cultural power. The theme of Beauty was further elaborated by Socrates and Plato. Over the fifth-fourth century BC, Plato elaborated two most important concepts of beauty: beauty as harmony and proportion between the parts (derived from Pythagoras), and beauty as splendor, as expounded in the Phaedrus, which was to influence Neoplatonic thinking.



In Plato's thinking beauty has an autonomous existence, distinct from the physical medium that accidentally expresses it; it is not therefore bound to any sensible object in particular, but shines out everywhere. According to Socrates, men are said to be beautiful and good in the same respect and in relation to the same things, and, in relation to the same things, even the bodies of men are shown to be beautiful and good; in general all things capable of being used by men are considered at once beautiful and good respect to the things they happen to be useful for. The same things may be beautiful and ugly: for example, what is good for hunger may be bad for fever and what is good for fever maybe bad for hunger; or again, what is good for a wrestler is often bad for a runner.

If, therefore, a thing is well suited to its purpose, with respect to this, it is beautiful and good; and, should the contrary be the case, then it is bad and ugly. To portray beauty, instead of representing the human body tall or short, in light or in shadow, in the bloom of youth or with the wrinkles of age all though the medium of colors, Socrates believes a human body or object can be portrayed by the characteristic moods of the soul, its charm, sweetness, amiability, pleasantness and attractiveness. (Eco: 2004, 49-50)

Nietzsche was inspired by the Greeks in the elaboration of two different and at a time complementary ideals of beauty, which had a big impact on our contemporaneity. Serene harmony, understood as order and measure, is expressed in a beauty that Nietzsche called Apollonian beauty. But this beauty was at the same time a screen that attempted to conceal the presence of a disquieting, Dionysiac beauty, which was not expressed in apparent forms, but over and above appearances. Dionysiac might be the beauty of sound, Apollonian the beauty caught by vision; the two forms of perception (sound and vision) preferred by the Greeks (probably because, unlike smell and taste, they can be referred to terms of measurements and numerical orders): only to the visible form was accorded the definition of beauty, in the sense of which pleases and attracts. Chaos and music thus came to constitute a sort of dark side of Apollonian beauty, which was harmonious and visible, and as such they fell within the sphere of action of the god Dionysus. (Eco: 2004, 56-58)

#### Apollonian vs. Dionysian

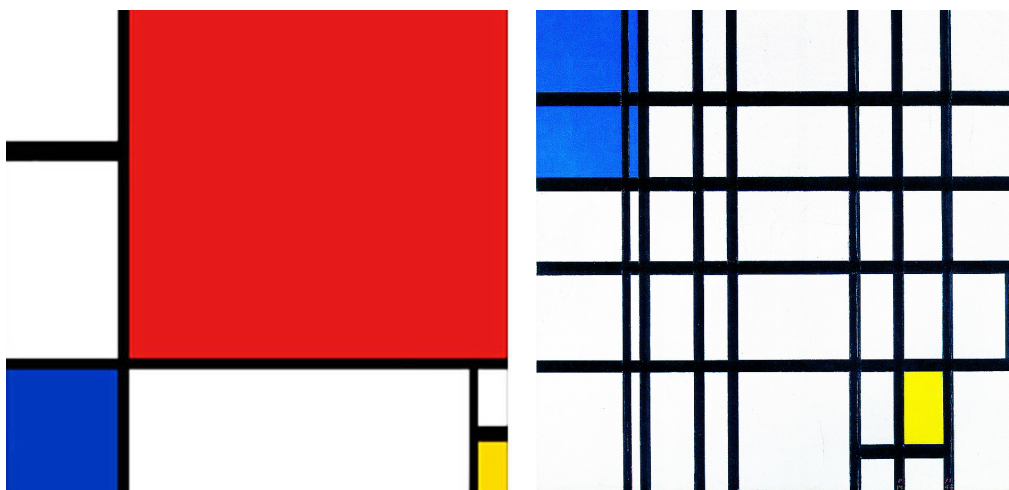


Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.1 Piet Mondrian, *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1930. Oil on canvas, (72.5 x 69 cm).

Figure 1.2 Piet Mondrian, *Rhythm of Black Lines*, 1935/42. Oil on canvas, (72.2 x 69.5 cm).

## Chart of Character Traits

<b>Apollonian</b>	<b>Dionysian</b>
thinking	feeling
self-controlled	passionate
rational, logical	irrational, instinctual
ordered	chaotic
the dream state	state of intoxication
principle of individuation	wholeness of existence
value for human order and culture	celebration of nature
celebration of appearance/illusion	brute realism & absurdity
plastic & visual	arts music
human beings as artists	human beings as the work and glorification of art

In the eighteenth century, the original style involved breaking with traditional styles on theoretical grounds of content, while traditional subjects and poses were rejected in the interests of greater freedom of expression. But it was not only the artistic community that was calling for greater freedom from the canons: Hume arrives at an aesthetic subjectivism bordering on scepticism.

In this context the fundamental thesis is that beauty is not inherent in things, but is formed in the mind of the critic. The importance of this discovery is on a par with Galileo's discovery of the subjective character of the qualities of bodies (warm, cold, etc), in the seventeenth century. The subjectivity of "bodily taste" - the fact that a food tastes bitter or sweet depending on the taste organs of those who sample it, and not on its nature, - corresponds to an analogous subjectivity of "spiritual taste": since no criterion of judgement is objective and intrinsic to things, the same object can appear beautiful to the one person and ugly to another.

The aesthetics of the eighteenth century attached great importance to subjective and indeterminate aspects of taste. According to Kant, beauty is that which pleases in an objective manner without its springing from or being ascribable to any concept: taste is therefore the faculty of making a dispassionate judgement of an object (or a representation) through pleasure or displeasure; the object of this pleasure is what we define as beautiful. (Eco: 2004, 246, 264)

However, certain terms began to become popular: "genius", "taste", "imagination" and "sentiment" and it is these words that let us see that a new concept of beauty was coming into being.

A beautiful thing is defined by the way we apprehend it, by analyzing the reaction of the person who pronounces a judgement of taste. The debate about beauty shifted from the search for the rules for its production or for its recognition to a consideration of the effects that it produces. The idea that beauty is something that appears as such to the perceiver, that is bound up with the senses, the recognition of a pleasure, was dominant in diverse philosophical circles. (Eco: 2004, 275, 291)

At the same time, the idea of the sublime was also making headway. During the mid of seventeenth century, Burke opposed beauty to the sublime. For him, beauty was primary an objective quality of bodies "for which they arouse love" that acts on the human mind through

the senses. Burke was against the idea that beauty consists in proportion and harmony, and maintained that typical aspects of the beautiful were variety, smallness, smoothness, the gradual variation, delicacy, purity and fairness of color, and also to a certain extent grace and elegance. Burke's preference are interesting because they are in contrast with his idea of the sublime, which implies vastness of dimensions, ruggedness and negligence, solidity, even massiveness, and darkness. Burke avers that he is unable to explain the true cause of the effect of the sublime and the beautiful, but in fact the question he poses himself is: how can terror be pleasant? His answer is: when it does not press too closely upon us. Let's take a closer look at this statement.

It implies a detachment from the cause of fear and hence a certain indifference to it.

Pain and terror are causes of the sublime as long as they are not really harmful. With the sublime is the horror of something that cannot possess us and cannot harm us. In this lies the deep relationship between beauty and the sublime. The sublime is neither a image nor an object of a particular type, but the enactment of a scene in which the subject and object have a dynamic relation to each other within a specific setting. The awfulness of the object does not immediately threaten the subject, but rather - given the subject's safety-in-danger- it awakens in the subject an apprehension that is potential scope, even his scale, is greater than vast and fearful object. [...] Indeed, there seems to be something almost inescapably cinematic about Kant's description of the site of the sublime.



Figure 1.3

Caspar David Friedrich, *The wanderer above the sea of fog*, 1818. Oil on canvas, (98 x 74 cm).

I sit (safety) confronting such arresting, awful, fearful representation. As long as the gap between the subject and the object constitutes a margin of safety, as long as the subject does not cross that fateful boundary between the fearful and fear, the relation of the sublime can be maintained. If it is crossed, if the subject goes too far or the object comes too close, the sublime will collapse. The paradox of the sublime - or rather its inherent ratio - is that closer

I am to the boundary, the more intense is my experience of the sublime. The moment of its zenith is also the moment of its collapse. But the vastness of the object, its indistinctness, its lack of proportion or symmetry, does not necessarily signal a revolution in the relation between beauty and ugliness has occurred. For, if the totality of the object seems to be absent in all these sublime representations of the world with its unfinished and unlimited character, this does not mean that the sublime abandons the category of the totality. Here, totality is an attribute, not of the object but of the subject, and of the subject's relation to the object. The attributes of symmetry and proportion, which now may seem to be lacking in the object, none the less reappear as a symmetry and proportionality between the subject and the object. [...]

Today we are accustomed to talking about beautiful machines, for example: cars, mobile phones or MP3 players and so on. In general a machine is any prosthesis, or any artificial construction, which prolongs and amplifies the possibilities of our body, from the first sharpened flints through to the level, the walking stick, the hammer and the torch. When people were already taking a certain pleasure in the technological prodigy that is the Eiffel Tower had to be made visually acceptable with Classically inspired arches that were put there as pure ornament, because they have no weight-bearing function. (Eco: 2004, 392)

Summing up, what defined beauty from the past, the idea of "aesthetic beauty" begun from the Greeks: beauty as harmony and proportion. According to Socrates, the same objects can be beautiful and ugly. Socrates believes a human body or object can be portrayed by the characteristic moods of the soul, its charm, sweetness, amiability, pleasantness and attractiveness. Nietzsche was inspired by the Greeks in the elaboration of two different and at a time complementary ideals of beauty, Nietzsche called Apollonian beauty. But this beauty was at the same time a screen that attempted to conceal the presence of a disquieting, Dionysiac beauty, which was not expressed in apparent forms, but over and above appearances. Dionysiac might be the beauty of sound, Apollonian the beauty caught by vision. However, certain terms began to become popular during the eighteenth century: "genius", "taste", "imagination" and "sentiment" and it is these words that let us see that a new concept of beauty was coming into being. A beautiful thing is defined by the way we apprehend it, by analyzing the reaction of the person who pronounces a judgement of taste. At the same time, the idea of the sublime was also making headway. Burke was against the idea that beauty consists in proportion and harmony, and maintained that typical aspects of the beautiful were variety, smallness, smoothness, the gradual variation, delicacy, purity and fairness of color, and also to a certain extent grace and elegance. Pain and terror are causes of the sublime as long as they are not really harmful. With the sublime is the horror of something that cannot possess us and cannot harm us. In this lies the deep relationship between beauty and the sublime. From ancient time to present, every changing conceptions of the beauty, directly or indirectly influence to our "judgement" and "taste" of what beauty is.

# 3.

## UGLINESS AS A PREREQUISITE OF BEAUTY

Is ugliness also in the eye of the beholder? Or is it completely depending on what beauty is? If ugliness is relative to the times and to cultures, what was unacceptable in the past, might be acceptable today or tomorrow, and what is perceived as ugly may contribute in a suitable context to the beauty of the whole.

According to Kant, a natural beauty is a beautiful thing; artistic beauty is a beautiful representation of a thing. In order to appraise a beauty of nature as such, it is not required any previous concept of what sort of thing the object is meant to be, for example: I do not have to know its material finality (its end), for it is the form itself-and not knowledge of the end-that pleases us on its own account. But, however, if the object is presented as a product of art, and is as such to be defined as beautiful, then given that art always presumes an end in the cause (and in causality), we must first found our view on a concept of what the thing is intended to be.

For example, there is a beautiful baby, whose beauty we might think has been given him/her by nature or the DNA of her/his parent has made such beauty. In the case of the beauty of the baby, we talk of natural beauty: something not controllable, that happens naturally and independently. In the case of an object of art, we must look beyond mere form to a concept if we enable the object to be thought of in such way through a logically conditioned aesthetic judgment. We are then confronted with artistic beauty. (Kant: 1978, 1,2,78)

Ugliness finds its name in a word seemingly at odds with aesthetic achievement, it does not reject aesthetic achievement.

Ugliness is relative, however, because it cannot find its measurement in itself, but only in beauty. What may seem beautiful to one man may seem ugly to another and vice-versa.

But if we wish to elevate this accidental quality of aesthetic-empirical judgement above its lack of certainty and clarity, we must subject it to criticism, and therefore to the light of the supreme principles. The sphere of conventional beauty of fashion is full of phenomena that, judged by the idea of beauty, can only be defined as ugly, and never the less they pass temporarily for beautiful. (Eco: 2007, 135)

Beauty begins to appear in the world when the matter created becomes differentiated in terms of weight and number, circumscribed by its outlines, and takes on shapes and color; in the other words, beauty is based on the form that things assume in the creative process. Even ugly things are part of the harmony of the world, thanks to proportion and contrast. On the other hand, beauty has been regarded as possessing a immunity granted elation to truth. But is that base on what is beauty, or is a negation not just of beauty, but of truth? Does ugliness belong to whatever negates that truth? Or it belongs to a series of categories which similarly distort the truth of objects? It belongs to what is contingent, for contingency cannot admit of the truth of objects. It belongs to what is individual, for individuality does not express the

truth of objects. Ugliness, contingency, individuality are all terms which belong to the pole of negation. As a consequence, it follows that ugliness will be thought of from the point of view of beauty. At a logical level, ugliness is the negation of beauty; at the level of perception, ugliness is the opposite of beauty. All speculation about ugliness travel through the idea of what is not. Ugliness is always shadowed by the beautiful. For Aristotle, the beautiful objects is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality. [...]

Internally it exhibits coherence; externally it establishes a sharp boundary between itself and the world. This establishes a relation between perfection and the idea of the beautiful object. In this case, perfection does not mean, as it does to us, the zenith of beauty. The perfect object is, rather, one which is finished, completed. Any condition or subtraction from the object would ruin its form. [...] We have argued that beauty and ugliness operate in different registers, but this much they do have in common: they cannot be accounted for in terms of the way in which a culture imposes a scale and a hierarchy of preferences. The problems of beauty and ugliness both exceed, though differently, the way in which cultures use the terms. Like beauty, ugliness entails a certain relation of a subject to an object; nor can ugliness be reduced to a set of attributes which are assigned to it. It exists, decisively and fundamentally, within the relation. But what is this relation?

Kant's notion of aesthetic experience and of judgement cannot admit proposition such as "This is ugly". The judgement "This is beautiful" does not have an opposite. The failure to form a judgement of beauty is just that; it is not an assertion of ugliness. If ugliness is to become an object of inquiry, this inquiry will have to be conducted outside the scope of aesthetics. But like aesthetics it cannot afford to collapse into the relativism of taste. For, if the investigation of the ugly is reduced to the question of what is held, here and now, or there and then, to be ugly, there is nothing to say, beyond the fact that some people say one thing, some another. The sociological and historical investigation of personal preferences, or the cultural machinery of taste, can never accede to the problem of beauty and ugliness. For that problem is not about the variability of taste, but about a certain modality of subjectivity in relation to the object itself. (Beech: 2009, 145)

Is the ugly object an object which is experienced both as being there and as something that should not be there? It is important to detach this definition of ugliness as far as possible from aesthetics, for it is not at all a question that an object, having been judged to be ugly, is experienced as something which should not be there. This is not a theory of propriety. It is, rather, the experience of the object as something which should not be there is primary and constitutive of the experience of ugliness. In such experience is identical to the idea of its being in the wrong place.

But this does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place. For this is not a relation of incongruity or impropriety; the wrong place is an absolute. But in what aspect the ugly object is in the wrong place? Briefly, from the position of the subject to whom the object discloses itself as ugly. For example: the british anthropologist Mary Douglas has famously remarked that dirt is matter out of place. What makes dirt dirty is not its substantial form, however much we commonly believe this to be the case, but the fact that it is in the wrong place. In judaism the earliest ideas concerning sin were expressed not as abstract issues of ethics, but as the material problem of the stain. And it is the stain which leads that early notion of sin to imagine its expiation in terms of purification rather than restitution. A stain must be cleansed. Is this because the stain is ugly? The stain is not an aesthetic



issue as such. It is a question of something that should not be there and it must be removed. The constitutive experience is therefore of an object which should not be there; in this way it is a question of ugliness. This connection between a thing being in the wrong place, sin and ugliness still obtains where the prohibitions within a culture take the form, not of elaborate reasoning, but of swift revulsion from the “ugliness” of an act. In so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is ugly deduction from “good” space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this case, dirt, the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object.

Broadly speaking, the beautiful object remains the same size as itself, while the ugly object become much larger than it is. There is an important reason for this. All objects exist twice, both as themselves and as representation of themselves. The obsessional thinks in terms of the formula that ugliness is a function of proximity, but also thinks that the way to stop an object getting closer, to bring it under control, is to clean it. This involves a phantasy about gleaming surfaces; whatever gleams is sufficiently distant from myself. What I polish recedes; what is dirty approaches. The hopelessness of the task of cleaning is all too apparent. The more you clean something, the dirtier it gets. (Beech: 2009, 149)

# 4.

## SOCIAL MECHANISMS DEFINING BEAUTY MODELS

What is standard beauty in our society? Beauty might seem like something that we know when we see it, but the experience of beauty might relate to hidden motives, unintended consequences, structural conditions and spurious rationalizations--in short, the economies of taste. We continue to see beauty around us but this can no longer be the kind of elevated experience that might stand outside ordinary disputes, hierarchies and tensions. The philosophy of beauty from Plato to Kant may have been ethically charged, but it did not theories how individual pleasures, choices and tastes are always unwittingly charged with social content. Beauty becomes secular through the same historical process by which art sheds its aura. As social relations take on an anonymous, mechanized and abstract manner, beauty itself becomes subject to rationality, commodity exchange and calculation. Beauty gets tied up with design, style and marketing.

Nowadays beauty is undoubtedly a magnet for the cultural anxieties: the readjustment of gender roles that have been in the works since the Enlightenment, the commodification of the body in consumer culture, the genetic and evolutionary changing our understanding of human nature and the idea of beauty. The Enlightenment may have celebrated beauty as an experience of freedom from contingency, but in our day beauty seems anything but a liberation, bearing witness, instead, to our socialization or biology. (Beech: 2009, 45)

Today a female to fit in or at least approach the beauty standard of our society, tend to conceal her natural features with makeup and cosmetics. It's like wearing a mask to fit in the standard beauty canons. Sometimes it happens to encounter people without any makeup in the streets. In such case, a pure beauty is appearing, not defined by society's mechanisms. Far from standard.

If I assume we are all living in a "standard" society, is it possible to find a beauty in it? What would that beauty look like? What would its intrinsic value be?

Today we are surrounded by objects that are standardized in their shapes, surfaces and finishings. Also their contents and meanings are "standard", so that they can reach out for the largest audience as possible. When things are produced by machines, the outcome is more or less always the same: standard. If a slight mistake in the production occurs, the product is downgraded to b-type. It's not worth its value. It can't be fully accepted as it doesn't fit society's standard. Machines produce standard quality, which is a quality deprived of "imperfections". A couple of centuries ago, the quality of products instead of standard was human. Human quality entails imperfections and mistakes. The "standardization mania" sometimes exceeds common sense, like in the case of Japanese cucumbers' farmers, who downgrade to b-type every slightly bent cucumber because it didn't grow perfectly straight. Examples like this are endless and everywhere: it's enough to think about the few standard paper sizes in which your printer allows you to print: a4, a5, maybe a3.



We come to a world where everything is already defined and perfected. All the objects surrounding us have perfect, slick, surfaces and fit within the systems that contain them or make them function (for example, the a4 paper fits the “system” printer). As long as we live in such society, we, as humans, tend to lose our freedom of interpretation and the space to think and reflect becomes less and less. What is good and what is bad? Even this basic question becomes hard to answer by ourselves.

The standard society is shaping us so that we wear different “uniforms” (or masks) to fit in different standardized situations. If I work in an office, I’m expected to respect a certain dress code as well as and attain to specific guidelines regulating that environment. So if something happens to be “out of place” (like someone wearing worn down sneakers instead of leather shoes), then it is not considered part of a normality commonly shared. What is out of place, is relegated to a blurry space, which we can’t judge whether it is wrong or right. To avoid such embarrassing disorientation, we are often put in a position of having to follow: a certain career, a living style, an ideology, somebody’s else opinion, what to consume, school systems. Etcetera. And because of this “follower-like”, passive, position, where we mostly have to repeat the same living patterns, it got harder and harder to retrieve the meaning of things. My question is if, as artists or designers, we can have a power to change this standard society. I guess it is possible. It’s only a matter if we are willing to change it or not.

An example of how we can look at things in a more meaningful and “humanized” way, is the design project of a Lace Fence designed by Dutch designer Joep Verhoevan.

The Lace Fence is a high-end metal fabric that gives new insights in how you can create unique environments. It combines the ancient craft of lace making with the industrial chainlink fence.

This example proves how designers can take a responsibility in adding value to our standard society. The lace fence is not only produced by machine: the decoration part of the lace is produced in India by local craftsmen; the designer travelled to India to teach the technique of lace making through metal wire to the local craftsmen. It took more than 2 years for the lace fence to be ready for the market. Some people might wonder why, nowadays, we just don’t simply make a computer drawing and send the file to the machine to produce it. Yes, In this way we could have everything fast and ready. But if we rather want to live in a less-stuff-more-people world, we still need systems, platforms, and services that enable people to interact more effectively and enjoyably. I appreciate the designer’s decision to shift the production of the lace fence from machine to human hands. I think it is a beautiful way of doing it, which allows the local value of one country to be preserved. In this case, you support the local craft industry but on the other hand you create a clever industrial product to be marketed.

This way, we go from global to local, and then back to global again. The Lace Fence project translates that line of thinking. Fencing is a sign of how we modified and cultivated our environment. Brambles fences are rising rampantly around us to define space and private property. What would happen if a patch of embroidered wire would meet with and continue as an industrial fence. Hostility versus kindness, industrial versus craft. Lace Fence could improve urban landscapes everywhere. The result is that the fence is no longer symbolizing caution and danger. The message of Verhoevan’s lace fence is decidedly not “Keep Away”—it is instead “Enter.” It defined a new meaning of the fence itself and provides us with a different life experience. Wouldn’t it be better for children to look into their schoolyards through flow-

ery patches of fencing? Lace Fence might even be put to use everywhere in public spaces, changing the very meaning of chain link fence to something utopian. It explores the ways in which craft is spreading into society and contributes to increase and define objects functionality in a more “artistic” and “human” way.

If beauty in our society is learned (in the sense that we learn how to be beautiful and to recognize beauty through society), then how would we react to the fact of this acculturation? For a start, we must stop treating beauty as a thing or quality, and see it instead as a kind of communication.

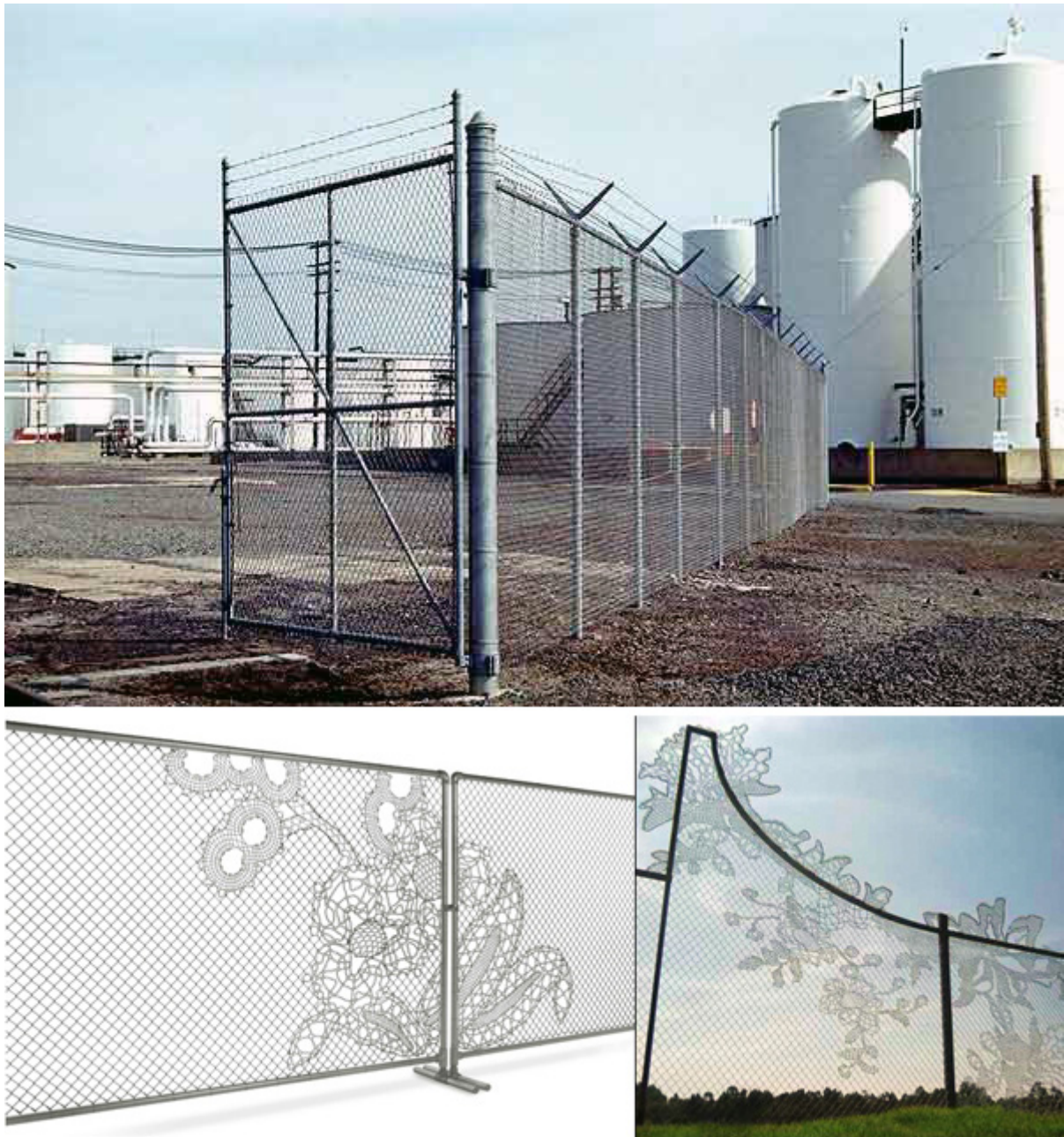


Figure 1.4

Joep Verhoeven, Lace Fence, 2006. Metal fabric, coated steel wire, (various size).

Summing up, In the modern social relations there are two contradictory conceptions of beauty: one is the conviction that it is a purely private, subjective experience; and the other is the notion that it is always, inevitably socially inscribed. Each, in effect, represents one side of the tension between individual and society that structures modern capitalism. To choose one of them is to fail to see how beauty has been transformed immanently by the forces of modern alienation.

# 5.

## THE BEAUTY OF NOTHINGNESS

What does nothingness mean? It is void, silence, unpretentious, modest, poetry, virtually invisible.

If I relate beauty to nothingness, what happens? Is nothingness sort of an absence of beauty? Or it is portrayed by our culture and society, and, in such case, can I define this absence of beauty? Is it beauty that you cannot even catch? Is its appearance neutral, almost hidden? When I refer to a beauty of nothingness, I suppose it is something I see or feel, about which I keep wondering whether it is or it is not beauty. Such unevokable sensation of beauty is extremely subtle, hard to acknowledge: one needs to train one's eyes and go beyond the layers, to discover the beauty of nothingness.

How often do we have a peaceful moment to sit and enjoy the silence in the world around us? In such a fast paced world, we forget the fundamental things in life. The artist John Cage was presenting the piece "4'33" to the audience with an opportunity to assess why it is that we listen to music. The music here is ambient, the creative control being handed over to the audience, to do with it what they will. This is an accessional and ground-breaking piece of work. When we listen to music, we shut out sounds around us to embrace the music we listen to. John Cage knew this. The silence in this piece forces us to direct our attention to whatever noises and sounds that come about, sounds or noises that we make. In doing so, we become our own orchestra. "When I hear what we call music, it seems to me someone is talking, and is talking about a feeling or is talking about ideas and a relationship. And when I hear the sound of traffic, I don't have a feeling everyone is talking. I have a feeling that sound is acting, and I love the activity of sound. It does get louder and quieter, and it gets higher and lower. and it gets longer and shorter. We don't need sound to talk to us. We don't see much difference between time and space. We don't know when one begins and one stops. People expect listening to be more than the activity of listening itself, so sometimes they speak while listening. The meaning of sound, when I talk about music, finally comes to people's mind that I'm talking about sound. It doesn't mean anything. It is not inner, it is just outer. I love sounds just like they are. I have no need for them to be anything more. I don't need them to be psychological, I just want them to be sounds. The sound experience which I prefer to all others, is the experience of the silence, and silence is almost everywhere in the world: now silence is the traffic, when you listen to the traffic, you can see it is always different. I have nothing to say, and I am saying it, and that is poetry, as I needed it" (Cage, 1980) It's a manner of pushing boundaries, which I really respect. It is all about the meaning, not about the object itself, it is about you opening your mind to different points of view. John Cage expresses nothingness to be experienced through the hearing. That is particular evident in his "4'33" music performance, where he let the audience listen to all those noises and sounds we are exposed to, without realizing it, when we think we are experiencing

silence. Silence, to an absolute extent, does not exist: we are constantly immersed into an environment, and no matter how emptied of objects and supplements such environment might be, as it will always be reached by sounds or noises. The natural sound of the wind if i am in a desert. The human sound of somebody breathing next to me. The sound of the traffic, if i' m resting in my apartment. Silence is to help us pay more attention to and observe more deeply what happens in our surroundings, in an environment, no matter how familiar that is. Silence pushes us to discover and feel through hearing what is that "thing" around us. And question why is this thing there, what does it mean.

Silent contributes in putting our inner part in relationship with what we have around us. It helps concentrate and reflect. It might help experiencing beauty, as well. Silence and contemplation go hand in hand, after all!

If silence is the vehicle to experience the nothingness through hearing, is it - and how is it - different to experience nothingness through sight? What is the vehicle to experience such situation?

When posing this question, Malevic' s canvas "White on white", pops to my mind. His canvas is composed by nothing more than a black square on a white field. When he first exhibited the painting, critics and the public sighed that everything they "loved" (objectivity, the familiar appearance of objects) was lost. They were all of a sudden cast away in a desert deprived of objects: a black square on a white background! No more "likenesses of reality," no idealistic images nothing but a desert! But this desert is filled with the spirit of nonobjective sensation which pervades everything. Malevic sought refuge in the square form in the desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity. To him, the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects. Objectivity, in itself, is meaningless; the concepts of the conscious mind are worthless. Feeling is the determining factor ... and thus art arrives at non objective representation. It reaches a "desert" in which nothing can be perceived but feeling. By creating a "visual desert", Malevic left the spectator without any escamotage: he let him alone with the undeniable truth of his/her feelings.

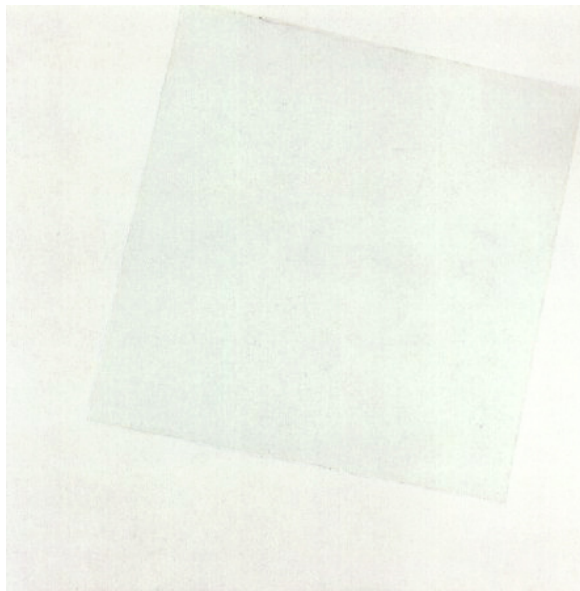


Figure 1.5 Kazimir Malevich, White on White, 1918. Oil on canvas, (79.4 x 79.4 cm).



Summing up, as through the experience of silence, we gain knowledge about our surroundings and our inner part is confronted with them, through the experience of a “visual desert”, we are left alone with our feelings.

If I would shift the “4’33” experience from the very specific space of the music hall, to a highly social environment such as a restaurant, what would happen? People go to a music hall to experience music; for that to be possible, instruments must be played. If instruments, such as in the famous case of “4’33”, stand still and mute, the orchestra resting, then what one is exposed to, is mainly human-originated sounds: people’s shifting their body position, or griping about what is happening, breathing, coughing.

Let’s now assume that in a restaurant, which is a place of conviviality, where people talk, discuss and chat all the time while eating their meals, people would be silent and had to limit any human-originated sound. What would we be then exposed to? To the sounds of objects: the cutlery squeaking, the thud of cups and glasses leant back on the table, etcetera. Such experience would allow us to perceive an usual environment with different, fresher, eyes. We would discover new values in our living habits, which we never realized before. Moreover, the experience of food, would be enhanced. At the same time, we would look at everyday life objects in a more surprising, unexpected, way.

The same experiment - the one of provoking silent - can be carried out in many different environments, times, spaces: from the big scale, to the small one, from a shorter time span, to a longer one.

The beauty of nothingness happens when I am able to look at things in different ways.

Our surroundings are saturated with things: layers and layers of things. To reach the value of things, we have to understand their contents and meanings. To investigate their own language and go deep into their root.

The beauty of nothingness is laying everywhere in our society. It is only hard to perceive because it is concealed by many artificial layers which are imposed by society. More often we learn how to look at things because of the social mechanisms defining our lives. We follow living patterns that are given to us and that we get to follow out of the fear not to fit in, to be isolated from the big group. We shall train our eyes to go through the layers and reach the real, human meaning of things as well as people. We shall look for a beauty which is intrinsic in human beings.

# 6.

My conclusion, Briefly

What defined beauty from the past, is the idea of “aesthetic beauty” inherited from the greeks: beauty as harmony and proportion. According to Socrates, the same objects can be beautiful and ugly. Socrates believes a human body or object can be portrayed by the characteristic moods of the soul, its charm, sweetness, amiability, pleasantness and attractiveness. A hero would be portrayed as not only beautiful, but also good (kalos kai agathos), sameways a betrayer or a moroon would be depicted as ugly and deceitivous.

Beauty is always hard to define on account of the subjective nature of judgments of taste. It's never status in a point to be clear and absolute. It has been changing by time, people, culture and judgments of taste. From ancient times to present, every changing conceptions of beauty, directly or indirectly influenced our “judgement” and “taste” of what beauty is. The subjective condition of judgments about beauty has not changed, but something has been added to make the beauty definition more difficult.

If I say that something is beautiful I am merely starting to think what is beautiful to me, but this judgment of beauty might differ in an other people's eyes. A same object, one can see it beautiful, and the other one can see it ugly. All objects exist in their two sides: both as themselves and as representation of themselves.

The experience of the object as something which should not be there is primary and constitutive of the experience of ugliness. At a logical level, ugliness is the negation of beauty; at the level of perception, ugliness is the opposite of beauty. All speculation about ugliness travel through the idea of what is not or what is being in the wrong place. But this does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place.

For example: there is a stain of dirt on my clothes, if I discover this dirt in a wedding party, that's to be put in a category of ugliness, and it results as being in the wrong place. In order to bring the dirt under control, one has to clean it.

But if I'd find the same stain of dirt in a place or situation in which I'm doing sport, I might think it is normal.

If dirt must be cleansed, is this because the dirt is ugly?

The dirt is not an aesthetic issue as such. It is a question of something that should not be there and it must then be removed to fit normality. But if we start to think what makes that dirt dirty, then it's to become a quite interesting concept to look at a thing. In so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a uncleanliness limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is ugly deduction from “good” space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this case, dirt, the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object. But what does dirt approach? Is dirt a representation of an unescapable truth or of a natural happening? Are, for example, the wrinkles on the face of an old lady something ugly to be concealed or just a

natural, undeniable, manifestation of time passing by?

We should think, on the other hand, that when things are being cleaned and highly polished, it is always easier to get them dirty again. The more you clean something, the dirtier it gets.

If the dirt is ugly deduction from “good” space, then all the body fluids of a human, are in general considered to be unclean, dirty and quite the opposite of beauty. But they actually are all natural products of our human body. So what in general is considered as ugly, is always when we are confronted with the others, not when we are on ourselves. I don’t necessarily consider my own body fluids disgusting, but rather natural. Whereas I tend to consider as dirty or unhealthy other people’s. Society and others might regard one’s dead skin or hair as disgusting. Somehow one would be disgusted in finding those same “human traces” left by others. To reflect upon what is our human intrinsic beauty without hiding it, it has become more and more difficult in the society we live in.

If I assume we all have the same degree of beauty and purity when we are born, growing up, we all evolve differently and such beauty is lost. That is not because our beauty has been changed or diminished. It’s more influenced by the social mechanisms defining beauty, which mostly shape our taste and parameters of judgement.

The beauty of nothingness in itself represents a purity and a beauty which is hard to get back to. Society marks the social mechanisms and pushes us to conceal such beauty and purity with masks, prosthesis and other artificial elements that don’t necessarily belong to our human nature. It is hard today to look at intrinsic beauty without social filters; it is hard to perceive its purity, also because of the standardized society we live in.

To show our real human side to society has become something to be ashamed of, an embarrassing entity, of which is easier to highlight defects rather than positive elements.



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