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What is Beauty? A Multidisciplinary Approach to Aesthetic Experience

Edited by

Martino Rossi Monti and Davor Pećnjak

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INTRODUCTION¹

MARTINO ROSSI MONTI AND DAVOR PEĆNJAK

1. Questions

Does art need to be beautiful? Can humour be beautiful? What is the relationship between beauty and mimetic behaviour? What does literature have to do with beauty? How did the rediscovery of Greek musical theories in the Renaissance affect the debate about the nature of the musically beautiful? Did Greek, Christian and Indian metaphysical theories of beauty and love share some fundamental assumptions? What are the limitations of neuroaesthetic approaches to beauty? Are the experience of beauty and the production of “art” confined to anatomically modern humans? Is the experience of beauty (or ugliness) confined to humans at all? Should we formulate a *biological* concept of beauty?

These are just some of the questions discussed in the following essays. Their heterogeneity immediately suggests that the purpose of this book is not to provide a straightforward answer to the supposedly timeless question “What is beauty?”, nor is it to bring “order” to age-old debates or finally “solve” them. Rather, its goal is simply to show that this question can be asked and answered in *many* different ways depending on a variety of factors: historical context, object of study, methodological approach, cultural or social attitudes, philosophical beliefs, ideological stances, emotional needs and so on. As it will appear evident, the question “What is beauty?” is not, and probably never was, *only* a philosophical question. Philosophers were (and are) only one among the categories of people dealing with this problem.

The essays collected in this volume – most of which were originally presented in December 2017 at the international conference “What is Beauty?” organised by the Institute of Philosophy in Zagreb – are a partial reflection of this rich and disorienting variety of beliefs, models and approaches, some incompatible, some coexisting in complex ways,

¹ Sections 1 and 2 were written by Martino Rossi Monti. Sections 3, 4 and 5 were written together by Martino Rossi Monti and Davor Pećnjak.

some converging. Their authors come from different areas of research: philosophy, history of philosophy, history of ideas, biology, neuroscience, anthropology, and palaeoanthropology. Their contributions cover some of the most debated aspects of the problem of beauty and “aesthetic experience”, pointing to the difficulties and implications of these questions, shedding light on interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to these issues, suggesting new models or directions for research and exploring past or recurring ideas about beauty and related notions.

This book is intended for both specialists and a general audience. The authors have been careful to combine rigorous scholarship with clarity of style and to provide clear and concise explanations of technical terms or concepts. Given the variety of topics addressed, this introduction attempts to provide some further background and context to help readers navigate the book and stimulate their intellectual curiosity. Section 2 will focus on *scientific* and *interdisciplinary* approaches (Radovčić, Fusani, Portera, Siri); section 3 on *anthropological* and *philosophical* approaches (Carrasco Barranco, Vidmar Jovanović, Hietalahti, Wulf); and section 4 on *historical* and *comparative* ones (Boršić, Jagušić, Rossi Monti).

2. Beyond dichotomies

The cover image of this book is a picture of a perforated and pigment-stained marine shell (*Pecten maximus*) recently discovered by archaeologist João Zilhão and colleagues (2010; 2017) at Cueva Antón, an archaeological site near Murcia, Spain. It is not the product of a combination of natural factors, but rather a cultural modification of nature; it was deliberately painted and perforated by someone. Apparently, however, that someone was not one of “us”. The shell dates to about 37.000 years ago, when *Homo sapiens* had not yet reached that part of Europe. It was probably made by Neandertal men, for body ornamentation, just like other, much older, perforated shells (ca. 115.000 years ago) found at another nearby site (Hoffmann et al. 2018). These findings challenge the idea that only *our* species – namely the so-called “anatomically modern humans” – is capable of what is usually described as “symbolic behaviour”.

“Early humans,” Ellen Dissanayake wrote in her splendid *Art and Intimacy* (2000, 115), “not only refashioned the skins, bones, and horns of other animals to serve as implements and tools but often decorated them, too. Regularised, repetitive geometric ornamentation seems to deliberately counteract the random or untidy look of natural forms”. Through practical activity, Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) said in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, man attempts “to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to

enjoy in the shape of things only an external realisation of himself. Even a child's first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an intuition of something that is his own doing" (Hegel 1975, 31). To what extent, however, are these impulses and capacities confined to *Homo sapiens*? Does "modern" behaviour depend on "modern" anatomy?

On the emergence of "aesthetic" behaviours, "symbolic thinking" and a "sense of beauty" among our ancestors and closest relatives – from *Australopithecus africanus* to the various representatives of the genus *Homo* – there exists a vast and proliferating multidisciplinary literature (Bartalesi 2012, 113-149). A great variety of hypotheses have been proposed, some cautious and substantiated by solid archaeological findings, others quite bold and unverifiable. Archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists – here as on many other issues – are divided. The impact of radiocarbon dating and, more recently, of molecular biology and evolutionary genetics has revolutionised their field (Llamas, Willerslev, Orlando 2017). Puzzles have been solved, exciting discoveries have been made, new frontiers have been opened, old assumptions have been demolished, but new problems and conflicts have also emerged (Callaway 2018). Some of these discussions revolve around the taxonomy, the behaviour and the cognitive capacities of Neandertals, who were present in Europe much earlier than *Homo sapiens* and for almost three hundred thousand years were probably its sole inhabitants.

As evidenced by palaeoanthropologist Davorka Radovčić's essay in this volume, "Neandertal Aesthetics?", these debates raise important questions concerning the definition of "humanity", the extent to which this category can be extended to our closest relatives and the very notion of what a species is.² Radovčić provides a balanced account and reviews a number of recent discoveries, including some extremely significant contributions made by herself and colleagues. In light of these findings,

² "No matter how much we may have had in common with the Neanderthals," Ian Tattersall (2008, 31-32) wrote, "it is still a profound mistake to assume that their way of perceiving and interacting with the world resembled our own. [...] If morphology means anything at all in our assessment of fossils [...], the Neanderthals were an evolutionary entity entirely separate from us". Zilhão (2010a), instead, has rejected the notion that species are defined by anatomy as much as behaviour and has favoured the conclusion that Neandertals and modern humans "were not different species" and that anatomical differences did not imply cognitive differences. Others, after considering the evidence (including cases of interbreeding), prefer not to take a position (Barbujani 2016).

she argues, it seems reasonable to imagine Neandertals as engaging in a number of activities and behaviours that, if found in a context associated with anatomically modern humans, we would not hesitate to call “symbolic” or “aesthetic”: body painting, cave painting, interest in curiosities or “found art” (such as natural objects resembling human form or showing geometrical patterns) and manufactured body ornament. In fact, some of the evidence had been available for a long time but had been overlooked or quickly dismissed by researchers. This dismissal happened mostly because the way of looking at such evidence – or *not* looking at it – was informed by a deeply rooted image of Neandertals as dumb “simian” creatures, an image that Radovčić and others are committed to dismantling. Overall, her essay raises serious doubts about the legitimacy of inferring significant cognitive differences from different anatomical structures. But how different were Neandertals from “modern” humans considering that they belonged to the same genus? And to what extent did those differences – skeletal, anatomical, genetic – limit their cognitive and behavioural capacities?

Biologists speak of “convergent evolution” when organisms not closely related – such as mammals, birds or insects – independently develop similar features over time. These features are called “analogous” because they have similar form or function, but different origins; a classic example is the wings of bats, birds and insects. On the other hand, similarities between different species (which can also have different functions) are called “homologous” if they were present in their most recent common ancestor; a classic example is the forelimbs of mammals. In other words, homologous similarities are explained through common descent. However, homology is a very ambiguous and problematic concept, especially because similarities can be detected at various levels (molecular, morphological, developmental), and the same trait or structure can be homologous on one level, but analogous at another.³ In other words, this terrain has become very uncertain.

In any case, the homology between the brains of the representatives of the genus *Homo* appears to some as a legitimate reason to infer that Neandertals and *Sapiens* shared certain cognitive abilities. But what happens when very distantly related animals – mammals, birds, insects – share some of these abilities? Can cognitive capacities “converge” in the presence of *different* anatomical and neural structures? This is precisely

³ Besides, traits are not immutable components passed on from generation to generation, but, like everything else in nature, change. Biologist Alessandro Minelli (2016) has therefore proposed a more flexible, “factorial” and “combinatorial” approach to homology. On these problems, see also Portera’s essay in this volume.

what neuroscientist Onur Güntürkün and cognitive biologist Thomas Bugnyar (2016) have asked: when cognition converges, do brains also converge? Or is it possible that similar cognitive processes are generated by different brains? These very important questions bring us to the essays by cognitive biologist Leonida Fusani and philosopher Mariagrazia Portera.

Since Darwin, the natural sciences have inflicted numerous narcissistic wounds on the dearly held belief that a thick wall separates man from other animals. According to Frans de Waal, in the past 50 years of research on animal cognition and behaviour, that wall has been reduced to a piece of Swiss cheese: except for language, no “uniqueness claim” has so far survived unchanged. Tool use, tool making, culture, food sharing, theory of mind, planning, empathy and inferential reasoning have all been observed in wild primates and empirically tested (De Waal, 2015). Primates, however, are only part of the picture. Cognitive processes are being studied across the entire spectrum of the animal kingdom, from bees to pigeons, from spiders to dolphins (Wasserman and Zental 2006). These developments have run parallel to profound transformations in our knowledge of both the human⁴ and the non-human brain.⁵ In addition, the fruitful encounter between developmental biology and evolutionary biology – the so-called field of “evo-devo” – is currently changing our understanding of evolution.⁶

As for non-human animals, some astonishing developments in the past thirty years have characterised the study of birds’ brain structure and cognitive skills (Vallortigara 2005; De Waal 2016). We know that birds have evolved in parallel with mammals for almost 300 million years; the news is that, according to many researchers, parts of their small and light brains seem to have evolved to perform some of the same cognitive tasks typical of the much larger and heavier brains of apes. Is this an example of “cognitive” convergent evolution? So far, mostly corvids and parrots have been tested, and they have proved to be extremely intelligent. But beyond demonstrating intelligence, since birds’ brains *lack* a cortex, these results mean that one of the most entrenched dogmas of cognitive neuroscience, namely that higher cognitive abilities depend on the presence of cerebral cortex, seems to have been demolished (Güntürkün and Bugnyar 2016). No wonder birds have been called “feathered apes” (Emery 2016).

Some, however, question the legitimacy of such comparisons, arguing that they risk reducing other animals to “pale versions of us” (cf.

⁴ Edelman (1992); Kandel (2006); Doidge (2007); Mitchell (2018).

⁵ Rogers, Vallortigara, Andrew (2013); Menzel and Eckoldt (2016).

⁶ Lamb and Jablonka (2008); Minelli (2009); Pievani (2016).

Portera in this volume). However, it is equally true that if our tendency to anthropomorphise other animals can make us blind to their “otherness”, the spectre of anthropomorphism can be evoked each time we want to preserve our sense of superiority over them. Whatever the case, the increasing evidence of a continuity between us and them shows the futility of relying on rigid dichotomies, as if it were possible to identify clear-cut boundaries between nature and culture, or between the presence and absence of cognition, emotion, or consciousness (Panksepp and Biven 2012; cf. LeDoux 2012). The problem, for De Waal, is that we “keep assuming that there is a point at which we became human. This is about as unlikely as there being a precise wavelength at which the colour spectrum turns from orange into red”. What we are, instead, is most probably “one rich collection of mosaics, not only genetically and anatomically, but also mentally” (De Waal 2015).

The implications of all these developments for our topic are profound. Leonida Fusani’s essay, “The Quest for a Biological Concept of Beauty”, discusses the possible relationship between the evolution of ornaments and the development of an “aesthetic sense” in animals, particularly in certain species of birds. Fusani, however, does not indulge in the kind of reckless generalisations or all-embracing explanations sometimes propounded by other scientists. His pragmatic, bottom-up approach only allows for hypotheses that can be empirically tested. Most importantly, his quest for a “biological concept of beauty” is not an attempt to establish whether specific animals share supposedly unique human abilities; rather, it points to the difficulty of explaining away some of the most extravagant combination of ornaments simply as indicators of fitness.

The birds in question – Australian bowerbirds, Papuan birds of paradise, Central- and South-American manakins and others – are known for their extremely elaborate courtship displays, which include spectacular “dances”, exhibition of brilliant colour patterns, modification of size, song, and sometimes meticulous arrangements of special “courts” or “arenas” for the show; only the best performers are chosen by females for mating. Darwin’s idea – later rejected by most biologists – was that certain traits are preferred because they are aesthetically pleasing to females. For him, birds were “the most aesthetic of all animals” and shared a “taste for the beautiful” with humans. Fusani is much more cautious, but nonetheless he is not prepared to reject the whole theory. With some important qualifications, he harks back to Darwin and suggests that females’ evaluations and choices of potential mates are based on a “holistic impression of the display” – a kind of gestalt perception – rather than on

preferences for individual traits. The challenge ahead – now that we know that similar perceptual and cognitive abilities do not necessarily depend on similar neural structures – is to develop testable hypotheses to study these animals' evaluation processes and their neural underpinnings.

In her rich and nuanced essay “Animal Aesthetics? Promises and Challenges of a Comparative Research Programme in Aesthetics”, Mariagrazia Portera shows no particular fondness for the “just-so” explanations popular among evolutionary psychologists. It is often said, for example, that our shared preference for savannahs over other types of landscapes derives from the fact that our African ancestors found more chances of survival in that habitat. For Portera, this line of reasoning is evidence of too narrow an approach to the problem of “the aesthetic” and its evolutionary history. By the same token, simply conflating “beauty” with what is most “adaptive” or “useful” will not take us very far, especially when these kinds of problems are not tackled from a truly interdisciplinary perspective. Combining insights and results from different disciplines, Portera suggests instead that we treat the much discussed category of the aesthetic not as a “monolithic trait” shared by this or that species – either human or non-human – but rather as “mosaic” of different components and capacities that might have followed different evolutionary pathways.

This conceptualisation presupposes a comparative, bottom-up approach to the problem, predicated on the fact that all life forms on Earth ultimately descend from a single ancestor. Such an approach, however, does not necessarily entail a reckless extension of human qualities to other animals – although the risk always exists, as Portera is careful to note. On the contrary, it requires isolating the “building blocks” of aesthetic capabilities and identifying their distribution among non-human animals and along the phylogenetic tree. Indeed, continuity does not imply identity: the fact that our aesthetic abilities, like any other human trait, are “rooted in a nonhuman past” does not mean that there are no uniquely-human aspects to them – nor does it exclude the existence of uniquely-*non-human* aesthetic capabilities.

The next essay introduces us to the domain of neuroscience proper. In the first part of “Neuroaesthetics and Experimental Aesthetics: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Aesthetic Experience?”, neuroscientist Francesca Siri emphasises some of the problems and pitfalls generated by the new discipline of “neuroaesthetics”, especially as concerns the study of “beauty”. In the second part, she delineates an alternative experimental approach to art and aesthetic experience which, rather than focusing on the elusive concept of beauty, sees the body-brain relationship as the

inescapable factor connecting the making of images and their reception. This way of framing the problem is typical of so-called “embodied” approaches, which are gaining a certain currency among cognitive scientists. What are these approaches like?

Today, as neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese has repeatedly observed, nearly all cognitive scientists present themselves as “monists” and “physicalists”.⁷ Nevertheless, they continue to draw a clear-cut division between cognitive-linguistic processes and sensory-motor processes – in other words, between the mind and the body. “Classical cognitivism sees the body as an appendix of little or no interest for decoding the supposed algorithms reportedly presiding over our cognitive life”, Gallese wrote with philosopher Valentina Cuccio (Gallese and Cuccio 2015). The problem is that, for a variety of reasons, we are much more willing to see ourselves as *occupying* a body rather than as *being* one. Our narcissistic tendency to keep the immateriality of mental processes separated from the materiality of the corporeal ones is a very convenient and reassuring way to preserve the “mind” from any evolutionary continuity with the animal world. Embodied approaches, instead, see things differently: the self is first of all a *bodily* self, and the mind is *incarnated*, so to speak. In this view, our mental processes, our way of experiencing the external and internal world and of organising this experience linguistically, our sense of identity, together with the way we interact with others, are profoundly rooted in the body, often at an unconscious level. Giacomo Rizzolatti, Gallese and others are investigating this phenomenological level of experience empirically through a variety of ingenious tests and experiments.

For Siri, an approach to aesthetics as that chosen by the various strands of neuroaesthetics is too narrow and too focused on finding neural correlates of aesthetic experiences, thereby neglecting many important factors, such as the role of bodily processes, historical and social contexts and individual variability. This critique also applies to the experimental study of “beauty”, which presents serious obstacles: an almost intractable variety of definitions of beauty and of their scope of application, the non-coincidence between the domains of beauty and art, differences in aesthetic behaviours and levels of brain activation and huge variation in the cultural, social, epistemic, subjective and historical factors that mediate our experience of art and beauty. Given these shortcomings, the alternative, bottom-up approach of experimental aesthetics described by Siri prefers to be agnostic on the definition of beauty and art. Siri draws instead from the

⁷ This means that they reject any form of dualism between the body and the mind and that they view all mental processes as fundamentally physical processes.

research of Gallese (her PhD supervisor), Rizzolatti and colleagues on the motor system and “mirror neuron system” in macaques and humans, which gave rise to the theory of “embodied simulation”.

In its aesthetic version, the theory of embodied simulation – which Gallese has formulated and tested in a constant dialogue with humanistic scholars – relies on the profound interconnectedness between the visual and motor system of the brain (“mirror” neurons discharge both when a certain action is executed and when it is observed). The theory argues that our basic level of response to images and works of art involves a kind of corporeal and empathic “resonating” with their intentional and emotional content. This apparently applies even to abstract art; for example, Lucio Fontana’s cuts or Jackson Pollock’s paint drippings seem to invite in the viewer an inner “simulation” of the artist’s creative movements. This elementary form of reception, Siri insists, does not underestimate the importance of cultural, historical and personal factors, but, rather, provides a framework to consider them. Therefore, she seems to suggest, whatever beauty is – and perhaps we will never know – the study of its appreciation should not neglect the role of the body-brain’s “sensorimotor involvement”.

3. Chasing beauty

The next four essays provide examples of the different ways in which the notion of beauty can be addressed from a *philosophical* perspective. In general, philosophers tend to focus on the conceptual aspects of problems rather than on the historical or cultural ones. What really matters, to them, is usually the content of a philosophical claim, not the context in which it is made. From this perspective, a question like “What is beauty?” does not necessarily require the qualification “When?”, “Where?” and “For whom?”. Past theories or arguments tend to be discussed and revived if useful to present preoccupations (Popkin 1992; Rossi 1999). In fact, ideas and cultural productions in general do not entirely “dissolve” in their historical and social context, because they can contain elements that – due to their abstraction, universality or connection to the human condition – transcend that context and can therefore be translated, understood and enjoyed across different cultures and epochs. Philosophers are interested in the universality of ideas, historians in their context-specific individuality, whereas intellectual historians try to negotiate the uncertain frontier between the two (Minogue 1981, 544).

As for “beauty”, at least since the time of Pythagoras, certain questions tend to reappear in different forms and contexts, while some

ideas or theories prove strong enough to resist or adapt to new situations. Classic philosophical dilemmas include: is beauty subjective – a matter of personal state – or objective – assessed against a universal standard? In other words, is beauty in the object or in the eye of the beholder? Is it confined to what can be seen and heard or are there other kinds of beauty – intelligible, moral, spiritual, divine? Is beauty grasped or judged by reason or by senses only? Is it a simple or complex property? Is it rational or irrational? Is it explainable or inexpressible? Does it depend on symmetry and proportion of the parts or on other mysterious qualities? Is it the result of rules or of their violation? Is it related to usefulness or to its absence? Is it the object of desire or disinterested contemplation? Is it a necessary property of works of art?

From an historical perspective, however, questions such as these were (and are) addressed in many different ways, depending on various contexts and philosophical traditions. Their recurrence, moreover, should not make us blind to the fact that words such as “beauty”, “art”, “nature” and others can take on very different meanings depending on those contexts and traditions, while the possibility to ask (and answer) certain questions – and not others – is also tied to historical and social factors. The association between “beauty” and “art”, for example, is in large part a modern phenomenon (Kristeller 1951; 1952; Konstan 2014, 3-5, 179), while modern conceptions of “natural” beauty are profoundly different from ancient ones (D’Angelo 2001; Bondí, La Vergata 2014). In addition, even within the same context, methods, assumptions, styles, goals and conclusions can be extremely various. Some philosophers appeal to the authority of reason, others to that of the senses. Some describe or analyse; others prefer to be allusive or even obscure. Some construct grand theories or complex arguments; others rely on intuitions and immediate experience. Some ask questions; others propose solutions. Some aim at clarifying and simplifying problems; others prefer to complicate matters. Some are annoyed by contradictions; others are fascinated by paradoxes and enigmas. Some interact with other domains of knowledge; others categorically refuse to do so, and so on.

This variety of approaches is also reflected in current philosophical studies of beauty, a popular topic nowadays. Depending on their background and style, their authors normally do one or more of the following: present and defend their own definitions and theories (usually by discussing, rejecting or integrating those of other philosophers), tackle a series of individual problems connected to the main one (usually by recalling historical examples or discussing everyday situations), “interrogate” past thinkers or traditions or act as their conveyors, construct

philosophical histories, dialogue with the sciences and discuss their results or philosophical implications, gather together personal impressions or “meditations”, offer diagnoses of our time or engage in various forms of social criticism and academic activism.⁸

From different perspectives, many philosophers have come to the conclusion that it is no easy matter to establish what beauty is or consists of; one may try to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for an entity to be called “beautiful”, but it seems beauty ultimately escapes these efforts due to its enigmatic nature.⁹ It is, so to speak, both a simple and a complicated quality: sometimes it is straightforwardly detected, sometimes it requires careful assessment and examination. Much has been written by philosophers of art in the analytic tradition about the problem of “aesthetic properties” and their distinction from non-aesthetic ones: the former, it is commonly argued, “supervene” on the latter, that is, they “emerge” from them (Sibley 1959; Levinson 1984; Matteucci 2008). Beauty, however, is usually considered to hold a special status among aesthetic properties (Zangwill 2003). In most cases, it is said, beauty is a property we grasp with our senses – it is perceptual. However, it seems that it is also an aesthetic property of a higher order. Take, for example, Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-1274) idea that we tend to call beautiful those entities that show properties such as harmony, right proportion among their parts and clarity. But of what do harmony, clarity and right proportion consist? To clarify this question, consider a figurative painting. Aquinas’ properties can be detected in the ways in which certain objects and events have been specifically arranged on the canvas; looking more closely, painted objects and events consist of particular patches of colours and their relations, while colours themselves have their own chemical composition. One can therefore say that there is a hierarchy of aesthetic properties, and that even aesthetic properties simpler than harmony, balance or colour patches consist, ultimately, of non-aesthetic properties.

Non-aesthetic properties relevant for comprehending beauty, however, need not be only physical properties; they can also be, for

⁸ Some recent examples: Zangwill (2001); Danto (2003); Givone (2003); Menninghaus (2003); Armstrong (2004); Desideri (2004; 2011); Sartwell (2004); Nehamas (2007); Cheng (2008); Liessmann (2009); Scruton (2009); Levinson (2011); Heller (2012); Zeglin Brand (2013); Garelli (2016); Han (2018); Mancuso (2018). See also the multidisciplinary essays in Liessmann (2010) and Höhle (2013). For cross-cultural perspectives, see Higgins, Maira, Sikka (2017).

⁹ One of the co-editors, Davor Pečnjak, thinks that beauty comes from the Triune God who is in itself beautiful (see Hill 2005, 224-227) and that we can still, or should, discern the concept of beauty through Aquinas’ starting notions.

example, the history of how the work was made or knowledge about the details of objects and events depicted in the work. On the other hand, if beauty can be grasped mostly by perception, then there must be a perceiver to sense it. It may be that qualities of the perceiving apparatus or process in the perceiver also contribute to calling something beautiful. Still, there are branches of fine art, like poetry and literature, which are not primarily, or not at all, perceptual; still, these works have many formal and cognitive characteristics that, taken together, make them beautiful. So, non-aesthetic properties relevant to beauty can be relational, cognitive, and historical, for example. In this view, beauty appears to supervene on both aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties; further, both objective and subjective factors are relevant in disclosing what beauty is (Pećnjak 2019).

In the Anglo-American tradition, starting in the 1960s, philosophers with an interest in aesthetics have dedicated a great deal of attention to the problem of art and its definition. For many, the domain of aesthetics came to coincide with the domain of art. However, most of these discussions deliberately excluded aesthetic or perceptual criteria from proposed definitions. No wonder that the notion of beauty, which had played a central role in most theories of art at least since early modern times, went through a decline in the course of the 20th century. This neglect was in part a consequence of the cultural influence of avant-garde movements, which, in the early 1900s, openly rejected the aesthetic ideal of beauty – and the bourgeois society that venerated it – in favour of a demystifying and politically-oriented art aimed at generating shock, repulsion and outrage.

Throughout much of his work, American philosopher Arthur C. Danto (1924-2013) certainly contributed to the philosophical decline of beauty, insisting that what distinguishes works of art from other things is not their appearance or specific aesthetic qualities, but rather their meaning, which can be accessed only by an intellectual and historically-grounded process of interpretation and criticism. However, in his late years, Danto modified his views on this issue. In fact, since the 1990s, there has been a sort of revival of beauty, and not just within analytic circles. Matilde Carrasco Barranco's essay, "Beauty and Art Criticism: A Proposal from A.C. Danto", discusses Danto's place in this revival and, more particularly, his reintroduction of the relevance and usefulness of the concept of beauty for art and art criticism. Danto's proposal has faced several objections. Carrasco Barranco reviews these objections and tries to meet them, defending a "feasible employment" of the concept of beauty in art criticism. In doing so, she underlines some of the shortcomings of Danto's position, including his too simplistic notion of beauty and his

neglect of the role played by extra-aesthetic factors – cultural, conceptual, historical – in its appreciation.

Taking a different approach in her essay, “Beauty and Literature: a (non)Problematic Relation?”, Iris Vidmar Jovanović argues that the appreciation of beauty is an “automatic, instinctive reaction” rather than the result of a specific attitude or form of attention: beauty is “felt, not calculated”. She makes this claim in the context of a discussion of the relationship between beauty and literature, stimulated by the fact that we often experience a “tension” between our lived experience of the “beauty” of certain literary works and our difficulty in explaining and articulating the nature of such beauty.

A growing number of interdisciplinary studies has presented our tendency to produce stories (both oral and written) and to immerse ourselves in these imaginary verbal worlds as rooted in our evolved biological and social nature (Dissanayake 2000; Carroll 2004; Cometa 2017). Vidmar’s approach is different, and more in line with analytical approaches. She seeks a theory that accounts for “what it is that we respond to when we find literary works beautiful”. Her focus is mostly, though not exclusively, on written poetry. Some philosophers believe that poetry achieves beauty somewhat analogically to visual or audible arts, namely through manipulation of linguistic elements that elicit very vivid visual images or melodic elements through certain rhythms, rhymes and sounds. But these theories do not sufficiently explain why literary works in general can be beautiful. In fact, one can find many examples that do not exhibit the aforementioned properties but are still considered beautiful; on the other hand, even poems capable of eliciting images can be considered beautiful on some other grounds. All forms of literary art, poetry included, manipulate language in order to present certain contents; this manipulation is done in propositional form. Therefore, for Vidmar, it is primarily the cognitive aspect of literary works that explains the sense of beauty: “what matters is not that the work delivers true propositions, but that it engages one in a process of (re)thinking, reconsidering and reflecting upon certain issues that it presents”.

Jarno Hietalahti’s essay brings us to a different realm altogether. In “Can Humour Be Beautiful? A Conceptual Analysis”, he examines whether, at some level, humour can be deemed “beautiful”. Hietalahti understands humour as an umbrella term covering a variety of phenomena such as farce, satire, irony and jokes. Among the three classic traditional explanations or “theories” of humour (Lippitt 1994; 1995; 1995a) – that of incongruity, that of superiority and that of release – he subscribes to the first, according to which humour is triggered when, in particular situations,

we perceive a mismatch, a paradox or a contradiction, so that reality does not meet our expectations. But what does this have to do with beauty? In fact, humour and laughter have been traditionally associated with its opposite, as he recalls relying on Aristotle's idea that the ridiculous is a "species of the ugly".

Hietalahti's examples could be easily integrated by drawing from Christianity's strong "antigelastic" currents (*gelao* in Greek means "to laugh"), in which the unrestrained bodily manifestation of laughter reflected the spiritual deformation brought by sin,¹⁰ to be contrasted with the silent inner joy of the saint or the blessed (Casagrande 2005). For Hietalahti, however, Western civilisation (along with other civilisations) has more to offer than these pessimistic views. In fact, appealing to humanistic ideals, and relying on Schiller's theory of the "play drive", he argues for a possible harmonisation of beauty and humour, in which humour becomes the "mirror of the beauty of humanity", a beauty grounded on the painful awareness and acceptance of our imperfection and finitude. There is nothing funny in the world for a perfect creature, Hietalahti repeats with Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Despite the ambiguity and potential risks of humour, he believes that, when grounded on humanistic values, it can be a force that "holds humanity together" and contributes to a "beautiful life".

It has often been remarked by scholars in aesthetics that classical and medieval ideas of beauty underwent significant changes in the modern era. With the gradual collapse of the old image of the universe, associations of beauty with order, symmetry, rationality, completeness and immutability have given way to associations with disorder, infinity, irrationality, mutability and haziness. From an all-embracing concept, beauty has been confined to the domain of the aesthetic (or the cosmetic). From a property of the cosmos or of reality itself (a "transcendental" in the medieval sense – see Pouillon 1946), it has become a property of art. Rationality and intellectual appreciation have given way to instinct or sensible perception – beauty is now "felt". Objectivity has been replaced by subjectivity and "taste". According to this view, these transformations

¹⁰ Take, for example, the words by the theologian Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394 CE) quoted by Stephen Halliwell in his masterly study on Greek laughter from Homer to Late Antiquity: laughter, Gregory writes, is "madness", and has no rationality or purpose. It involves "an unseemly bodily loosening, agitated breathing, a shaking of the whole body, dilation of the cheeks, baring of teeth, gums and palate, stretching of the neck, and an abnormal breaking up of the voice as it is cut into by the fragmentation of the breath" (Halliwell 2008, 9; cf. Minois 2000).

have led to a progressive marginalisation and decline of the once glorious notion of beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1980; Bodei 1995); in many cases, they have been seen as part of a more general process of social, anthropological, natural, and cultural impoverishment or degeneration brought about by modernity and its typical manifestations: science, technology, and capitalism. With the “mechanisation of the world picture” brought by modern science on the one hand (Dijksterhuis 1961; cf. Garber and Roux 2013), and the advent of industrialisation, modernisation and mass society on the other, diagnoses of a progressive decline, disappearance, commodification, banalisation or desacralisation of beauty in its various forms became common currency among intellectuals and artists of various stripes and backgrounds. In this context, beauty has either become an object of nostalgia, has been repudiated as a lie, has become the ultimate source of meaning or has been invested with messianic and redemptive functions.

This brings us to the essay on “The Appearance of the Beautiful: An Essay” by anthropologist Christoph Wulf, which is a rich and intense philosophical discussion of the fate of beauty in a disenchanted world. After its divorce from the domain of truth, goodness and cosmic order, Wulf argues, beauty has lost its privileged position. What has become of it in such a world? The answer is that beauty has been reduced to mere “appearance”: “an invention, a product of chance, or a vain lie”. After the “death of God”, the most ambiguous aspects of beauty – its connection to the ugly, the repulsive, the terrifying – have come to the fore, as in the poetry of Baudelaire. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has described beauty as a narcissistic lie that helps humanity to survive the tragedy of life. The aestheticisation and standardisation of everyday reality made possible by technology and design have further impoverished beauty, thereby increasing its demand.

Faced with this rather despairing picture of the modern world, Wulf thinks that a “privileged access” to beauty is offered not so much by rational interpretation or detached contemplation, but rather by our mimetic capabilities, which are inborn to us and find a variety of expressions. Mimetic processes (to which Wulf has devoted many studies) combine “receptivity” and “productivity” and act as a bridge between the subject and the world. Wulf is by no means unaware of the ambivalence, moral neutrality and potential danger of such dynamics. However, he believes that in the aesthetic domain – as in other domains – mimetic behaviour can be creative and generate *new* meanings, while at the same time being capable of approaching and “assimilating” beauty without forcing it into ready-made cognitive frameworks, but rather leaving intact

its “enigmatic” character of “appearance”. If, as Paul Valéry (1871-1945) wrote, “beauty may require the servile imitation of what is indefinable in things”, it is also true, for Wulf, that such imitation produces a surplus of meaning originally not expressed in the model.

4. Reviving the past

The last three essays are more historically oriented. Rather than constructing philosophical theories, historians try to reconstruct what other people in the past did, thought and said and their reasons for doing so. Their object of study is not so much what seems relevant to them in the present, but what seemed relevant to *other* human beings who inhabited other cultural worlds. In doing so, they try to remove the patina of obviousness surrounding our ideas, values, habits or institutions, and remind us that things change and that we do not inhabit the eternal present imagined by many philosophers and scientists. As they explore these past “foreign countries”, historians – like anthropologists – struggle to adopt unfamiliar points of view and to “bracket” or forget, as far as possible, their present assumptions (Lovejoy 1939; Rossi 1999).¹¹

The first historical exploration discusses a rather neglected Renaissance debate over what constituted the most fundamental elements that made music beautiful or ugly. At least since the times of Pythagoras and Plato, music had been assigned meanings and functions quite different from those we are familiar with today. Music – or, rather, its mathematical structure – was commonly seen as a reflection of the cosmic harmony established by God and ruled by numbers (Spitzer 1963). The study of musical numerical proportions, which was part of the medieval university curriculum, was supposed to disclose the rationality and the harmony governing the various aspects of reality. As such, it was also a way to ascend to God. As a science of numbers, “music” had to do with the concord between sounds as much as with planetary revolutions, the rhythm of the seasons, the relationship between the body and the soul or that between the bodily humours or the four elements. Ideas about the harmony of the world, the “music of the spheres” and about God as a “supreme musician” enjoyed great fortune in the West and were also

¹¹ For some historical studies on Western notions of beauty see, in general, Tatariewicz (1980); Eco (2004); Seubert (2015). On antiquity and late antiquity: Neri (2004); Porter (2010); Konstan (2014). On the Middle Ages: Pouillon (1946); Eco (1986); De Bruyne (1998); Carruthers (2013). On Renaissance and modern times: Panofsky (1960); Jäger (1990); Ames-Lewis and Rogers (1998); Vigarello (2004); Prettejohn (2010); Di Felice, Hendrix, Bossier (2019).

present in some of the protagonists of the scientific revolution (Fabbri 2003). In this context, for many, the beauty of music resided more in its abstract mathematical structure than in the arrangement of sounds or their pleasant effects on the listener. The sensual beauty of music or song could be seen as a means to foster devotion or mystical ascent but could also be feared or condemned due to its seductive and irrational power. As it has been argued, Augustine's (354-430 CE) inner conflict about the dangers and the benefits of music was to become characteristic of much of the Middle Ages (Fubini 2002, 70).

However, in the Late Middle Ages and especially during the Renaissance, an increasing attention was devoted to the practical, concrete aspects of music and its emotional and ethical effects (Page 1989; Palisca 2006). These developments run parallel to the gradual secularisation of music and the emergence of a passive audience as distinct from the religious community actively participating in liturgical music. The re-emergence of ancient musical theories also played a very important role. Historian of philosophy Luka Boršić's essay, "The Petrić-Bottrigari Controversy Over Tetrachords: A Renaissance Debate on the Basis of the Musically Beautiful", illustrates an important aspect of this changed atmosphere. Boršić examines an intricate dispute between the composer and polymath Ercole Bottrigari (1531-1612) and the philosopher Francesco Patrizi (1529-1597). The controversy, like others at the time, revolved around the tuning system. Boršić provides an impeccable account of the technical aspects of the question – which will certainly be appreciated by musicians and historians of music – but is careful to place it in the context of the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient Greek musical texts. Particularly important in this respect was the late rediscovery of the music theory of Aristoxenus (ca. 375-after 320 BCE), a famous pupil of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), whose *Harmonic elements* were translated into Latin by Antonio Gogava in 1562 (Palisca 1994). Contrary to the Pythagorean tradition, Aristoxenus did not subordinate music to mathematics, but believed that the criterion of musical beauty resided in the "discerning ear" rather than in abstract mathematical ratios. Boršić shows how Patrizi was Aristoxenian in his understanding of musical intervals as linear distances rather than numerical ratios; this characteristic, however, was in patent conflict with his Pythagoric-Platonic leanings. So why did he reject the arithmetisation of music? The answer is perhaps connected to his theory of space: "his unwillingness to endorse the mathematisation of music," Boršić argues, "may reflect his understanding of numbers as merely products of thought, not constitutive or explanatory of the natural world".

The idea that visible beauty is a reflection of – and a possible gateway to – a higher, invisible and divine beauty is a very old and powerful one. In Western civilisation, its first fully articulated expression is found in Plato's *Symposium*. Plato (ca. 429-347 BCE) presents this kind of beauty as both the source and the culmination of all other forms of beauty, which are hierarchically placed along a ladder that ascends from the lowest to the highest, from corporeal to intellectual beauty up to the incorporeal domain of supreme beauty. In a context of mostly homoerotic love, sexual desire for bodily beauty is ultimately transcended and transfigured, as the lover climbs the ladder, into enjoyment and contemplation of “beauty itself”. To this beauty Plato attributes precisely all the characteristics that visible and material beauty does *not* have: eternity, immutability, completeness, purity, non-relativity, immateriality, unity, autonomy and self-containedness (*Symp.*, 210e-211b). The message is clear: however attractive, *any* particular form of beauty is limited and imperfect, and must be progressively discarded in order to reach the only true and divine beauty.

In another of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, the emotional shock caused by looking at the face of a loved one is connected to the painful loss of the beatific state enjoyed by the soul *before* its fall into a body. To experience the beautiful, therefore, is to be nostalgically reminded of that previous condition, in which the soul blissfully contemplated and possessed the highest beauty of all (of which the beautiful face is just a pale reflection). In yet another dialogue, the *Timaeus* (29a-30d), Plato presents the harmony of the cosmos as an image of the beauty of its intelligible model and of the goodness of its divine maker.

The fortune and emotional grip of these ideas was (and remains) immense: properly adapted, they can be found in a great variety of traditions, from Hermetic to Neoplatonic, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism. Already in Plotinus, however, we can see a tendency to rarefy and de-eroticise personal beauty, as well as an increased attention to the beauty of the cosmos.¹² Not surprisingly, this trend is also typical of Christianity. But what happened to Plato's quite Greek insistence¹³ on beauty as an object of love and desire? What was the Christian reception of this element? What problems did it arouse considering the very different attitudes of Christians and Platonists toward the body and its fate

¹² Neri (2004), 92-95. On the Neoplatonic spiritualisation of bodily beauty and its Christian reception see Rossi Monti (2018).

¹³ Cf. Most (1992); Neri (2004); Konstan (2014).

in the afterlife? And what about other traditions not directly influenced by Platonism?

These are some of the questions addressed by philosopher Dragana Jagušić's in her essay "From Physical World to Transcendent God(s): Mediatory Functions of Beauty in Plato, Dante and Rūpa Gosvāmī". Jagušić's approach is a combination of historical analysis and comparative philosophy. She argues for the presence of significant similarities between very distant authors such as Plato, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and Indian poet and theologian Rūpa Gosvāmī (1493-1564). Despite the many differences between these authors, she shows that for all of them beauty had not just aesthetic, but also metaphysical and spiritual meanings. More particularly, in all of them beauty, often intrinsically connected to desire, played a "mediatory function" between physical, intellectual and spiritual levels of existence. In other words, the various degrees of beauty were seen as steps on a ladder ascending to the deity. For Jagušić, these similarities point to the "universality" of certain features of beauty.

However, the role of the body is problematic; while in Plato erotic desire plays an important function because it "drags" the subject toward beauty, at the same time the supreme vision is granted to those souls which will no longer descend into a body. No wonder later Platonists were horrified by the notions of Incarnation and Resurrection, while Plotinus is reported to have said that he was "ashamed of being in a body". In Dante's works, his love for Beatrice is invested with a mediating role that allows him to ascend to God first through physical attraction, and then through philosophical contemplation and discourse. Rūpa Gosvāmī also insisted on the necessity of transforming "sensual" or "earthly" love into a selfless and supernatural one. Unlike Plato, however, Gosvāmī understood the possibility of perfecting one's body along the ascent in a way that Jagušić finds similar to the Christian notion of the spiritual or resurrected body.

To illustrate the topic of the last essay by Martino Rossi Monti, "The Slaughterhouse and the Smiling Fields: On Pain and Beauty of Nature between Newton and Darwin", we do not need to look beyond the Platonic tradition. In fact, a few passages by Plotinus (ca. 204-270 CE) can serve as a perfect introduction. The "universal order" of the cosmos, he writes,

extends to everything, even to the smallest, and the art is wonderful which appears, not only in the divine beings but also in the things which one might have supposed providence would have despised for their smallness, for example the workmanship which produces wonders in rich variety in

ordinary animals, and the beauty of appearances which extends to the fruits and even the leaves of plants, and their beauty of flower which comes so effortlessly, and their delicacy and variety.¹⁴

This providential order cannot be the outcome of blind chance. Everything is made according to “beauty” and “justice”. But if this is so, “what, then, is the necessity of the undeclared *war* among animals and among men?”. It is “necessary”, Plotinus explains, that animals should devour each other; it is like a mutual exchange of life among creatures equally destined to eventually die. So, if by dying a violent death they are “useful” to others, “why do we have to make a grievance out of their usefulness?”. “It is far better than if they had never come into existence at all”, writes Plotinus.¹⁵ If we complain, we behave like those ignorant people who criticise painters because the “colours are not beautiful everywhere”.¹⁶ In fact, the “beauty” and “fitness” of the whole depend on each part being where it should be in the hierarchy of beings. Those parts that appear evil have their place in the beauty of the universe and contribute to its harmony and should be judged from the point of view of the whole, not the parts. In the same way, “weaker” or “duller” notes or voices contribute to the perfection and beauty of the melody or the song.¹⁷

These and other arguments provided by Plotinus – who draws extensively from other sources, especially Stoic ones – are part of an age-old philosophical effort to justify the presence of evil and pain in a universe whose divine cause was believed to be good and wise. Many of these arguments would become part of the traditional repertory of justifications put forward by Christian theologians and apologists for centuries. Rossi Monti’s essay discusses the European revival of these arguments in the course of the 17th century, when many devout naturalists, philosophers and theologians struggled to reconcile the new image of the universe brought about by the scientific revolution with the idea that the world, in all its beauty and order, was the product of the infinite wisdom of a benevolent God. However, their endlessly repeated strategies to either rationalise, minimise or deny the existence of suffering in nature were met with an increasing number of criticisms, to which Charles Darwin (1809-1882) eventually gave his fundamental contribution. The arguments of the apologists, however, did not die, but simply changed

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3, 2, 13:19-25.

¹⁵ *Enn.*, 3, 2, 15:16-29.

¹⁶ *Enn.*, 3, 2, 11:9-11.

¹⁷ *Enn.* 3, 2, 17:64-75.

form. In the world of ideas, as is well known, there are no permanent defeats.

5. An exciting journey

As we have seen, the experience of “beauty”, the language used to convey it and the unstable conglomerate of conflicting values, ideas and emotions associated with it are not confined to a specific context, but circulate across disciplines, groups, cultures and epochs. The noun “beauty” and the adjective “beautiful” take on a variety of meanings and overtones depending on the context and the language in which they are formulated. Therefore, these words probably mean something different in each of the questions listed at the beginning of this introduction. To further complicate matters, the history of “beauty” can no longer be conceived – especially after Darwin – only as a *cultural* history, but also as *natural* one. It is a history that involves both human and non-human animals and stretches back into that “dark abyss of time” (Rossi 1984) preceding the appearance of early humans.

As a result, any harmonising or reductionist attempt at finding the “true” and “ultimate” meaning of beauty – whether grounded on the philosophical pathos of etymology or the elegance of an all-embracing theory – is probably destined to fail. This, however, should not be a reason for intellectual despair. Rather, it should further encourage us to explore the vast territories disclosed by our authors.

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