

Beauty is a Basic Need

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Beauty in an international context

The mix of cultural identities and concepts of beauty appears to be a timely one. Discussions within the framework of internationalism and beauty are becoming increasingly frequent, so that we are witnessing not only the re-evaluation of beauty but also its re-introduction as a criterion for the judgement of art. The concept of beauty has been subject to some rough treatment in recent years. The reappraisal of beauty could lead to new insights into art and maybe into life itself.

Beauty and morals

Our perceptions of beauty are often determined by our culture. A woman wearing a burka is regarded by some as erotic and attractive, while others regard it as a restriction of the freedom of women and therefore as the epitome of ugliness because it symbolises repression for them. In such cases, beauty is associated with morals. This relationship is often evident, and it applies to art as well. Alan Schechner's self-portrait *It's the Real Thing – Self Portrait at Buchenwald*, 1993, [\[photo 1\]](#), which was part of the exhibition *Mirroring Evil* at the Jewish Historical Museum in New York, was seen as being an insult to the victims of the Second World War. (*1) The artist Schechner had photographed himself in front of a photo of Buchenwald concentration camp, an anachronistic image that was described as amoral and unethical. The artist, shown in front of dying prisoners with a can of Diet Coke in his hand, positions himself both as the person who is portrayed and as the portrayer. The viewer assumes an anachronistic position vis-à-vis both the artist and the portrayed (i.e. the prisoners). Susan Sontag wrote in 'On Photography' that we live in an age where "to live is to pose", and this is reflected in the different layers of this image. (*2) The Diet Coke can makes the image even more disturbing. Here, terror and revulsion override any form of analysis, serious reflection or, if you would like, enjoyment. It is difficult to

judge this artwork against the criterion of beauty, given that Schechner appears to want to shock us.

Maurizio Cattelan's image of a kneeling Hitler was also considered by many to be morally objectionable. [photo 2] The Hitler piece from 2000 stands just one meter high and is made of polyester and resin, and is finished with wax. In a strikingly realistic portrayal, the Nazi leader is seen looking up with his hands clasped at his waist. The statue stands alone in a vast gallery. The Boymans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, where the artwork was shown in 2002 and caused considerable uproar in the Netherlands, said that the statue fits into the Italian Grottesque art genre and that Cattelan intended to bring the viewer face-to-face with "the personification of evil." "By confronting this loaded theme with irony, the historic and ethical importance of this extremely dark period of our existence becomes clearer". (*3) But is it beautiful? Amoral and unethical images are often regarded as distasteful, and therefore ugly. But is this true in every case? And does this mean that all ethically sound artworks are beautiful? Certainly not, but there does appear to be a relationship between beauty and the moral message communicated by the image or its maker.

Beauty and truth

As I previously mentioned, beauty differs from place to place and is culturally determined. That is what drives the search for a universal concept that links our perceptions of beauty. Morals and ethics certainly play a role in that quest, but in this context beauty is also associated with another universal concept, namely truth. In the final lines of *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (1819), the English poet John Keats wrote: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." But this is not always true. Sometimes the truth is too painful to portray, as is demonstrated by the artworks that I have just discussed. When asked about the beauty of her writing, the Vietnamese playwright Le Thi Diem Thuy replied: "Do you know why I write so beautifully? It's because I don't want to tell the truth." By this she meant that she did not want to tell us about her journey to America as a boat refugee. And perhaps the beauty lies in the fact that we can

sense her pain by reading between the lines (*4)

Beauty and ugliness

It is difficult to find an all-embracing international definition of beauty. Moreover, some people and professional critics find it easier to explain why something is ugly than why something is beautiful. The Museum of Bad Art (MOBA) was opened ten years ago in Boston. MOBA has put together the world's finest collection of crudely-rendered, illogically-conceived, tacky, weird and just plain lousy paintings and sculptures (each piece purchased for under \$6.50). Located in a movie theatre basement near Boston, the museum is on a mission to “bring the worst of art to the widest of audiences.” Co-founder Louise Sacco's favourite in the bad-art stakes, *Sunday on the Pot with George*, [photo 3] is a loathsome acrylic on canvas. The picture shows a man in waist-hugging white underpants, sitting on a potty ensnared in a swarm of paint blotches. “We have backgrounds in fine art, and we look for work that is sincere, that communicates to people, that instils a reaction, but something went terribly wrong,” said Sacco. “Either the artist chose the wrong subject matter, or used too much enthusiasm with a brush, or there were many other avenues of bad decisions’ (*5)

To turn the argument around: A museum for bad art implies that there is also ‘good’ art. This leads us automatically to the question: what *is* good art? The criteria mentioned by Sacco raise questions about the nature of good art. Isn't good art sincere, and doesn't it also communicate with people? How did it all go so terribly wrong with ‘bad’ art? What sort of criteria should we employ to describe what is beautiful? Or is beauty a criterion in itself?

Beauty and politics

Beauty is not only related morals or to truth, it is also related to power. Power in turn relates to the distribution of beauty and beauty concepts. A blue-eyed blond woman is the generally accepted ideal of beauty, and there is a similar universal consensus concerning the beauty of Michelangelo's David. But another

relationship exists between beauty and power, that of the patron who commissions the artwork and the artist. What is the nature of that relationship between beauty and power? Does it only lead to ugliness, as some people claim? In the foreword to the catalogue *Art and Power, Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, (1995), Eric Hobsbawm wrote that he regarded the monument to Vittorio Emanuele by Giuseppe Sacconi in Rome's Piazza Venezia, 1884, [photo 4] as one of the clearest examples of how the relationship between power and art can result in extreme ugliness. (*6) In this case, art has been used in order to create public drama. A pompous building frames a statue of the first king of Italy. Why is this ugly? And does *everyone* find it ugly? I assume that the artist and the person who commissioned it derived a great deal of enjoyment from it. Moreover, relationships between art and power do not always result in ugliness.

Take the painter Jacques-Louis David, who played both an artistic and political role in the French Revolution. His painting [photo 5] *The Death of Marat* (1793) portrays a hero of the Revolution. The painting is one of the most successful French paintings of the 18th century. It combines colour, composition, emotion and message in a unique way. The painting is beautiful as art can be beautiful. It has a meaningful beauty that contradicts the claim that good art cannot be political.

Much of the art made during the Apartheid regime in South Africa was politically engaged and was mainly aimed at the government system. The artist Willie Bester (1956, South Africa) brought out the big guns for his political indictment: found materials, black iron objects and painted scenes that combine to form a scream of powerlessness and protest. [photo 6] Yet the work is beautiful. It is appealing, the composition is balanced and stands even without the message. It should be pointed out here that Bester is, of course, morally on the right side. This beauty differs from that of the works of the Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat. [photo 7]. Like Bester, she expresses herself in content and form, and is politically engaged *vis-à-vis* both gender issues and Islam. However, her work has been criticised for being 'too beautiful' and 'too aesthetic', a negative

judgement in terms of contemporary art criticism, which in itself is an interesting development. But the creation of beauty, which can appeal to many people without being superficial, is a quality that not everyone possesses. Neshat has it and she conveys a highly charged content in a visually attractive way.

So what is beauty?

As I mentioned earlier, beauty is a complex notion. So let us be brave and try to define beauty in the sense of human creation as opposed to natural creation: *beauty not only imbues reality with form, it also concerns the maker's attitude and character, the sublimated, subjective relation to reality and the quality of the creation. It is about the strength of interpretation...* In this definition beauty comprises a number of different aspects: the talent of the artist, the attitude and personality of the maker (morality), the quality of the creation (content and form), and the attitude and perceptive capacities of the viewer (object versus reality). However, there are a number of complicating factors here: the photographer Leni Riefenstahl took beautiful photographs yet, despite her claims that she was apolitical, she worked for the Nazi regime in Germany during the 30s and 40s. **[photo 8]** The author Céline was a disseminator of amoral ideas, but he could write beautifully. These artists did not have wonderful personalities. Yet their creations were perceived as being beautiful. So we should refine our definition and argue that beauty is created by achieving the best possible balance between the factors we have named: maker, creation and viewer. Moreover, ethics, morals, attitude and form also play important roles.

Beauty and suffering

The portrayal of ugliness is also a part of aesthetics. Equestrian statues and war monuments are examples derived from this. Some are successful, others less so, as Hobsbawm observed.

But the portrayal of war and suffering has gone on since time immemorial. Susan Sontag wrote an interesting book about it called *Regarding the Pain of Others*

(2003), and it has been the theme of exhibitions and books, such as *Mirroring Evil, Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* by Norman L. Kleeblatt. (*7) The depiction of suffering by artists and photographers is a difficult subject in terms of aesthetics. Can an object be beautiful if it depicts something ugly? Can the photograph, taken by the war photographer Robert Capa, depicting the loyalist militiaman collapsing into death during the Spanish Civil War (1937), [photo 9] possibly have any aesthetic virtues? A successful image always involves the best possible balance of form, structure, use of colour and the subject's depiction, all of which contribute to the creation of beauty. In this sense we can describe Capa's photograph as 'beautiful', although the subject is at the same time realistic, true and horrifying.

Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Mogor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986) 1991-2 [photo 10] by the artist Jeff Wall depicts the recent war in Afghanistan in the manner of the 18th/19th century Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828). "Jeff Wall travels the path of ambiguity trying to orientate his interests in the classic sense of beauty, he intends for us to observe a Dantesque scene with pleasure and approval. He does this by arranging the stains as if in a collage, in a frame which gives them unity (the battlefield, a vertical slope crossed by a path in the shape of an arch). The stains, the gazes, the gestures, are organised according to the obligatory norms in classic art, rules that have to do with symmetries and relations between parts," writes Permalink on the internet. (*8) He refers to classic beauty, which is dictated by rules of symmetry and choreography, while at the same time fictively depicting the horrors of the Afghan war. Just like the war etchings *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810-20) of Francisco Goya [photo 11] *Dead Troops Talk* is a fictive image of a real war, an imitation of reality, a human creation.

On the other hand, man has an inherent lust for the gruesome. As early as 1757, Edmund Burke wrote in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*: "I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that

no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others. There is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity.” (*9)
This need is the opposite to the need underlying the search for the tranquillity of beauty. The question is, which need is dominant?

Indian philosophy has explored this subject in increasing depth for many centuries, and its personifications include the Goddess Kali. Kali symbolises beauty and ugliness at the same time, and the beautiful appearance of evil. Kali is represented as a black woman with four arms: in one hand she has a sword, in another the head of the demon she has slain, and with the other two she is encouraging her worshippers. For earrings she has two dead bodies and is wearing a necklace of skulls. Her only clothing is a girdle made of dead men's hands, and her tongue protrudes from her mouth. Her eyes are red, and her face and breasts are besmeared with blood. She stands with one foot on the thigh and the other on the breast of her husband.

Kali is both a mother and a destroyer. She represents life and death, creation and destruction. She personifies the simultaneous lust for beauty and ugliness; for her they are linked and cannot live without each other. (*10)

In order to explore this issue further we must also analyse situations of war and disarray: situations in which the human environment has become ugly and is of a lower moral order. Can beauty survive in such conditions? During the war in Sarajevo, did theatre relieve the suffering? Did it bring hope or comfort to the brave audiences? Did writing and painting bring some respite to the Vietnamese fighters in the tunnels during the carpet-bombing by the Americans? I think that the answer is yes. It is precisely in the most atrocious of circumstances that people feel the need to create and experience beauty. Beauty brings happiness, hope and comfort; it gives people dignity and respect. The proof is that, in times of need, people risk their lives to perform and watch a play, just as they endanger their lives by stealing bread.

That which beauty can bring – happiness, hope, comfort, dignity and respect –

unites people worldwide. When we behold beauty, we feel alive and, indeed, that life has meaning. In addition to food, health and a roof over our head, these aspects of life are so important that it is always surprising how few policy-makers care about culture and its beauty. In his essay *Beauty in Context* (*11), the Indian theatre critic Rustom Bharucha wrote: "(....) I would include the concept of beauty that needs to be retrieved not just for our aesthetics but for our sanity." By disregarding beauty, we are also disregarding ourselves and the discovery of meaning in life. Defining beauty consequently becomes less important than asking what it means to us.

Beauty in a global context

I have said that beauty is defined in many different ways throughout the world. Indian film stars are not slim enough for the Western market. The modern art of the West is regarded as loathsome in certain other cultural contexts. In Japan, the throat and neck are regarded as the most erotic and beautiful parts of a woman's body. Tattoos are a must in some regions, and taboo in others. In short, each culture defines beauty in a different way, but in all cultures it represents the same positive emotions and life values. That is why we all have the capacity to perceive beauty. We may not all perceive it in the same way, but we can empathise with the feelings it evokes. This universal concept of beauty is what unites people the world over, and transcends our cultural differences.

That is why we were all so horrified when the Bamyán Buddhas in Afghanistan were destroyed (2001) [photo 13] and the National Museum in Baghdad was plundered in 2003. [photo 14] As we all remember, many people felt a sense of powerlessness following the looting and destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage. War destroys not only human lives but also contemporary and traditional cultural heritages. Those who seek to erase an important cultural heritage do so in order to destroy the dignity and identity of its people. This is the strongest possible proof of the importance of beauty and its cultural expressions.

To sum up some of my arguments in this essay, I would like to stress the following:

1. The universal definition of beauty lies in its consequences and meaning, rather than in its definition, 2. Beauty is the other side of ugliness, without each other they do not exist, 3. Beauty is a basic need for everybody everywhere; everyone has a right to beauty, because without it we are nothing.

Notes:

1. Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil, Nazi Imagery/ Recent Art*, the Jewish Historical Museum in New York and Rutgers University Press, 2001
2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, by Picador USA, September 2001
3. The Internet Jerusalem Post, by The Associated Press, Thursday, September 5, 2002
4. Examples taken from Rustom Bharucha, *Beauty in Context*, Prince Claus Fund Journal # 2, June 1999, Prince Claus Fund. The Hague
5. Cari Scribner, *Off the Wall. Boston's overlooked museums celebrate the good, the bad and the ugly of Bean Town*. From the internet site of NorthEast Traveller.
6. *Art and Power, Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, The South Bank Centre, 1995, exhibition organized by Andrew Dempsey, publication edited by David Britt Hayward Gallery, 1995. Foreword by Eric Hobsbawn.
7. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2003, London, and idem note 1.
8. On internet: Sunday, January 09, 2005, In Photography/ Permalink: http://00e00.blogs.com/english/2005/01/jeff_wall_dead_.html
9. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, Oxford UP, 1990, quoted from Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* see note 7.
10. Many thanks to Gayatri Spivak for stressing that Indian scholars and experts have been researching these issues for many centuries. Ideally more of these insights would have been included in this aesthetic discourse. The description of Kali was taken from Nitin Kumar, *Kali Goddess from Mother Goddess as Kali – the Feminine Force in Indian Art*, which was published in ExoticIndiaArt in 2000.
11. Rustom Bharucha, idem note 4.

12. The Prince Claus Fund founded the Cultural Emergency Response in 2003 in reaction to the news of the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad. The Cultural Emergency Response is the of the Red Cross of cultural heritage, and rescues traditional and contemporary items from destruction by natural or human disasters. Info: Cer@princeclausfund.nl.

Images:

1. Alan Schechner, *It's the Real Thing – Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*, 1993, Digital Still. www.dottycommies.com. Internet project.
2. Maurizio Cattelan's, *Him*, 2000, photo realistic sculpture of a miniature Hitler in a prayer – an icon of fear, three feet high, installation
3. Unknown, *Sunday on the Pot with George*, acrylic on canvas, 22 x 37 inches, donated by Jim Schulman, collection MOBA, Boston: caption on their website: 'Can the swirling steam melt away the huge weight of George's corporate responsibilities? This pointillist piece is curious for meticulous attention to fine detail, such as the stitching around the edge of the towel, in contrast to the almost careless disregard for the subject's feet.'
4. Giuseppe Sacconi, *monument to Vittorio Emanuele*, in Rome's Piazza Venezia, 1884
5. Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, oil on canvas, 165 x 128.3 cm (65 x 50 1/2 in.), Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Belgium
6. Willie Bester, *The Dogs of War III*, 2001, metal sculpture with found objects, 190 x 165 x 230 cm. (through Mary Goodman Gallery)
7. Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness* from 1994, photowork and mixed media. Neshat photographed the bottom of two bare feet with the foreboding image of a rifle barrel posed between them. On the soles of the feet, she painted poetic calligraphy. Here, we see a variety of characteristics playing into her art; the artist is a woman (the feet are clearly those of a woman); she comes from Iran, where she felt threatened as a woman and as an activist (the gun can be interpreted as a threat or as a means of defence); and, now, she lives in New York (and the image contains a mixture of eastern and western symbolism).
8. Leni Riefenstahl, *Nuba Warriors Natu and Tukami encamped*. The white ashes have both holy and practical significance for the Nuba, for reasons of strength, health, cleanliness, protection against insects and bodily decoration. 1973, Leni

Riefenstahl Produktion

9. Robert Capa, *Moment of Death*, published in *Life* magazine 1937/07/12
10. Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Mogor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* 1991-2, Dye Destruction Transparency, 90 x 164 inches.
11. Francisco Goya, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, etchings, 1810-20: 1. *Para Eso Habéis Nacido*, Etching, 16 x 23,5 cm. and/or 2. *Sera Lo Mismo*, 14,5 x 21,5 cm. and/or 3. *Tampoco*, 15,5 x 20,5 cm. (last one: Paris Bibliotheque Nationale)
12. Ousmane Sow, *Sitting Wrestler*, part of a series of sculptures called *The Nuba*, sizes??, 1984, photo: Béatrice Soulé
13. Destruction of the Bamiyan Budhas in Afghanistan in 2001, photo credits.....
14. Looting of the National Museum in Baghdad, April 2003, photo credits....