

Aesthetic Investigations

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Beauty. A Brief Conceptual Journey

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Abstract: The journey I have arranged is strictly conceptual; it deals with the systematic implications of the concept of beauty. It begins in rocky lowlands and ends in astounding heights. But I promise, the journey will be brief. I develop my guiding concept in an increasingly adventurous manner—as adventurous at least as one can be in the realm of the conceptual. My suggestion simply is: sit back and enjoy the ride.

A conceptual journey will presumably not seem all that attractive to potential readers. Some of them might think I intend to narrate the *history* of the concept of beauty, that I will present diverse understandings of beauty as they have developed through the centuries. But if that was my intention, I could have just said it straight out. No, the journey I have arranged is a strictly conceptual one; it deals with the systematic implications of the concept of beauty. It begins, as is customary of philosophical endeavours, in rocky lowlands and ends in astounding heights. But I promise, the journey will be brief. So I will be developing my guiding concept in an increasingly adventurous manner—as adventurous at least as one can be in the realm of the conceptual. At the end, some participants in the journey will probably no longer wish to follow me, even though they will see how dizzying a conceptual journey can turn out to be. So my suggestion simply is: sit back and enjoy the ride.

I. THE JOURNEY

1.

As is well known, beauty is a species of the good, for everything that is immediately experienced as good can be praised by using aesthetic predicates such as ‘beautiful’, ‘wonderful’, ‘nice’, ‘elegant’, ‘charming’ etc. All these terms and their many relatives evaluate something as good—not in the sense of being good for something else, but in and of itself. In the German language at least, it is completely natural to talk about a ‘beautiful proof’, a ‘beautiful event’ or of ‘a beautiful thing of you to do’ (letting me continue to sleep), whereas English speakers on such occasions will apply terms such as ‘elegant’, ‘wonderful’ or ‘nice’. However different the linguistic practices of aesthetic praise might be, all of the things to which we ascribe such predicates fulfil one basic condition of beauty—to *be* in such a way that the thing or event itself is valuable.

This is likely the most everyday meaning of the term beauty and its relatives: It refers to something with intrinsic value, that is, something that is not, or not only, good in an instrumental sense and thus worthwhile being attended to.

2.

To be beautiful in a stronger sense, a second condition must also be fulfilled: A thing must *appear* in such a way that it *shows* itself to be intrinsically valuable. Only here does beauty take on its actual aesthetic significance. (As we saw in my first condition, the word beautiful and its relatives do not always have a straightforward aesthetic meaning.) That which has its purpose in itself and is thus beautiful in this *pre-aesthetic* sense does not necessarily appear in its goodness. But if it takes on this appearance, it is certainly more beautiful (and the *word* ‘beautiful’ takes on a clearly aesthetic meaning.) What is intrinsically good reveals itself to our senses: A cogent proof is elegant, an event takes place on a sunny day, a look of care or love lights up your eyes. In these cases, the good can be *separated* from its *appearance* as something good, but only this improbable appearing brings to light what it actually is—something that is good for its own sake and entirely worthy of being perceived.

Here as well, we are very close to the aesthetic of everyday experience: of objects and situations, which exist for their own sake and whose presence can occupy, or temporarily captivate a given observer, be they parks or people, restaurants and their menus, auditoriums or automobiles. In these instances of potential beauty, by the way, instrumental qualities often play a significant role: A beautiful chair is at least halfway comfortable, a beautiful car handles rather well, a beautiful lamp radiates a decent light, a beautiful building is also functional. But as long as we speak of beauty, this instrumental or functional goodness can never be the core of our aesthetic dealings with or experience of these things or events (and thus also not the core of our

judgments about them). Instead, that core lies in the opening of an encounter with a relieving, exhilarating or even enchanting present.¹

3.

In a different and often more intense manner, something can be experienced as beautiful if it is an instance of the good which enters the world solely on the power of its appearing. It thereby fulfils a further condition of beauty: To be good in and of itself, indivisible from the sensations of its appearing. In moving landscapes and passionate works of art, space and time acquire a shape in which every sort of fulfilment remains bound in its sphere. However much meaning and significance, value and truth might be contained in these situations, everything about them feeds on the intensity of a play of inexhaustible forms.

Taking part in this play of Gestalten, wherever and whenever it might take place, necessarily entails breaking with the continuities of everyday life and, not seldom, opening up an exit from these continuities. The decisive feature of this type of beauty is a constitutive interdependence of sensible *form* and—depending on the circumstances—existential, historical, cultural, political or philosophical *content* in the face of its respective manifestations. The way in which something is or touches us always depends on how it presents itself; every physical and psychic instance of ‘being moved’ on the part of the perceiver is determined by its phenomenal movedness. Here, nothing can be good unless it does good: The quality of beauty is no longer an accessory or an add-on to qualities that would be valuable in other regards; it lies solely in the sensations of its contingent or artificial configuration.

4.

The presence of beauty receives a final modification when within it a fourth condition is fulfilled; that is, when something becomes an event revealing no *other* good besides the swirl of its appearing—when for instance a desired body, a beguiling city, a thunderous storm or a captivating building is so present that we simply cannot let go of its existence and our being here. Here, the gap between the aesthetically perceived object and the aesthetically perceiving subject fuse to create an ecstatic affirmation of the situation of this perception itself, whose intensity is virtually sparked by a momentary configuration of things and events, of their emergence and disappearance. The sound of nature and music in particular invites us to do so, time and again. To be receptive to this beauty means being sensitive to—and thus threatened by—the event of an uprising of the present in the midst of the rest of time.²

5.

Well, that’s it. Our journey has taken us to four stations. i. In its simplest form, beauty is a matter of being good in a way that is not, or not merely,

instrumental. ii. In its elementary *aesthetic* form, beauty is a matter of circumstances and occasions, of all kinds, appearing as good. iii. In an additional meaning, the experience of beauty leads to a dwelling in the face of objects, for its own sake, whose inner quality cannot be divided from the play of its appearances. iv. In an ecstatic form, beauty occurs as the unbound perception of a present that can be affirmed in a unique fusion of presence and absence.³ Or, to put it in one sentence, all instances of beauty are something good in itself, but particularly the *appearing* of something that is good in itself, especially within the landscapes of nature and art.

6.

At the very least, these four steps help us understand why it has repeatedly been claimed that ethics and aesthetics are one, or at least extremely closely related. After all, some of what is good in itself is also beautiful in an aesthetic sense, and everything that is beautiful is good in itself. You may have noticed, therefore, that my brief story of beauty contains a strong historical ingredient. Strictly speaking I have recalled, in a rather heterodox manner, the Platonic conception—influential for the entire tradition of aesthetics, all the way up to Gadamer and Adorno—that beauty is an appearing of the good and—but this is *my* qualification—*sometimes* of what is true in a cognitive sense *as well*. To be sure, this philosophical link of beauty and the good and the true has often been mocked (just think of Nietzsche); however, I believe it touches the heart of the matter. It does so especially if we take the true in the attributive sense in which it converges with the good anyway (for instance, when we speak of ‘true friends’ or ‘true pleasures’ or when an advertisement proffers ‘the one true beer’). Yet the link between this sense of the true—the truly good—and propositional knowledge is in no way coincidental; after all,—to exaggerate just a bit—the entire meaning of conceptual knowledge is to guide us in our orientation towards what is ethically true, be it the existential or the moral and political good.

In the present context, however, another consequence is more important. It is the concept of beauty—and not one of the more recently introduced rival concepts—that not only *has* traditionally dominated the field of aesthetics, but that *should* dominate it in our day as well. It should be noted, however, that the predicate ‘beautiful’, just like the predicate ‘good’, has a nearly endless amount of counterparts—just think of aesthetic (or aesthetically used) words such as ‘pretty’, ‘attractive’, ‘elegant’, ‘suspenseful’, ‘overwhelming’, ‘awesome’, ‘subtle’, ‘staggering’, etc. Or think of the many synonyms of ‘good’, of adjectives such as ‘just’, ‘honest’, ‘serious’, ‘courageous’, ‘clever’, ‘generous’, or ‘friendly’. These innumerable terms give our esteem for—or our disapproval of—ethical and/or aesthetic phenomena a more appropriate, because more precise, expression than do brute concepts such as ‘the good’ and ‘beauty’. Nevertheless, what is true of the concept of the good is also true of the concept of beauty: it, and only it, forms the fundamental and, in this

regard, unrivalled category of philosophical aesthetics, thus also providing, of course, a basic category of philosophy in general. The explication of such categories, of beauty in our case, is capable of illuminating and providing the rationale for the basic *interest* humans have in the diverse forms of aesthetics. So it is no wonder that the signs of a rehabilitation of beauty have been gathering for some time.⁴

II. ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Even after conceptual journeys, there are always quite a few stories to be told. That's why I will now present a short series of additional narratives (or post-remarks), the main point of which is to make clear that my previous considerations were not quite as reactionary as they may have seemed. This is because my *short cuts* contained a heterodox message about both the classic and the classic modern understanding of beauty.

1.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental opposition between beauty and the good, for the former entails a rejection of what is *merely instrumentally* good. It stands in opposition to everything that is only good for the sake of something else, instead of being good for the sake of its own or of our own existence. The diversity of beauty is an unending advertisement for the diversity of *these* species of the good. The four-fold meaning of beauty therefore contains a simple message: time and again, we should give up the search for higher and further-reaching meaning and purpose. (A sense of beauty is in this way an anti-fundamentalist sense.)

2.

A sense of beauty entails a sense of the horrible. Not because the horrible is beautiful, which taken in itself is not the case. (It only seems that way to those who are blinded anyway.) Instead, by dwelling in the face of the horrible, we dwell in our sight of it—with a power of perception to increase its own capacity through everything, even the most horrible. This is a capacity to find what is thrilling in what seems inconspicuous and what is inconsolable in what seems glorious. In the name of beauty, a sense for beauty is not fixated upon beauty. It can preserve its passion for the exceptional even when the shock of an appearing object promises nothing but the pure exercise of the most extreme awareness. In this borderline case, any enjoyment of the presence of a beautiful *object* disappears, but not the enjoyment of the fragility of the perceiving *subject*. Adorno raised this borderline case to the paradigmatic case of an aesthetics in dark times, when he wrote in his *Minima Moralia* that 'there is no longer any beauty or consolation, except in the gaze that goes straight to the terror, withstands it and in the undiminished consciousness of negativity, holds fast to the possibility of that which is better.'⁵ Even though it is highly questionable to declare this extreme of beauty to be the core of

beauty, since the exception it represents would no longer be comprehensible (an exaggerating procedure, however, that illuminates the method of this entire book) it remains true that the sense of beauty stops for nothing and no one. It is gruesome in the sense that it doesn't recoil at the perception of gruesomeness. That is how the sense of beauty shrinks back from it—by refusing to glorify it. That is how it stands up to the horrible—by standing behind a perception of the horrible that does not take the step of affirming it. The sense of beauty can be beguiled and unsettled by many things, but it doesn't let itself be convinced that it needs the horrible in order to be horrified aesthetically, nor that the enjoyment of the *representation* of the horrible in the danger zone of art is an enjoyment of the *existence* of the horrible.

3.

The opposition between beauty and the sublime is artificial. The world in visible proportion or in visible disproportion to one's own possibilities—that is not what is captivating. Rather listening for what is not harmonious in that which is, and for what is harmonious in that which is not is. Depending on the tonal mixture, we can name the occasion for such an awareness 'beautiful' or 'sublime' or use some other aesthetic adjective. But each lacks suspense without the other. Beauty that smoothes us without vexing us is not beauty; something that is sublime and unsettles us without liberating us cannot lift us up.⁶ The land of the aesthetic knows no borders. That is what the aesthetic is: refusing to delimit our ability to perceive. My claim, however, is not that there are no differences in the land of the aesthetic, for there are obviously more than enough of these. But I believe that we misunderstand a difference, such as the one between beauty and the sublime, if we do not see these values as a polarity *within* beauty, and thus as an often latent tension between the four particular species of the good I distinguished at the beginning of this essay.⁷

4.

Whoever doesn't regard the paintings of Francis Bacon as beautiful will not be able to find what is unsettling about them. Or think of cinema. In certain circles, horror films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* enjoy cult status, even though these films are not beautiful in the normal sense in their—likewise intentional—primitiveness and atrociousness, and thus are not good films according to customary standards. Nevertheless, the fans of such things take special pleasure in viewing them, precisely because, as instances of a very particular artistic genre, they lack any good taste whatsoever. *For them*—the fans—these films are highly sophisticated products, whose play with horror gives them a special aesthetic appeal and makes them appear successful, which is why from this perspective it is not paradoxical to talk of a 'nice horror movie.' In my opinion (and now of course I will continue to make aesthetic judgments in order to clarify certain consequences of my theoretical

understanding of beauty), things are entirely different when it comes to films such as the Grindhouse Double Feature *Death Proof* (2007) and *Planet Terror* (2007) directed by Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, which in their extreme violence unfold a surreal and ironic play on various film genres. I could name several other films in this context, such as *Scarface*, directed by Brian de Palma (1983), in which a chainsaw also makes an unpleasant appearance, or the *Alien* trilogy, especially the first part directed by Ridley Scott (1979). These are films that present gruesomeness, terror and fear in a ghostly light, and lead us into fascinating zones of the ambivalence of human self-experience, because they create an outstanding form for such a purpose—and thus a form of beauty.

5.

Since these last remarks will not strike everyone as being immediately plausible, in closing, I want to cite two artists who can definitely not be viewed as practicing a rosy, soothing, trivializing, or kitschy aesthetic.

The first is Michael Haneke, who with regard to his films—such as *Funny Games*, *Code Unknown*, *The Piano Teacher* or *Caché*—is repeatedly accused of favouring an exaggerated and even inhumane attitude of coldness (an accusation, by the way, that I take to be unjustified). In an interview with Thomas Assheuer in 2008, he commented on the relationship between precision and beauty:

‘I can be enthusiastic about the beauty of a thing. But I can also be enthusiastic about the precision of a thing. The primary virtue of art is precision. Be it painting, literature or film—it is all about observing as precisely as possible, and about rendering that observation as precisely as possible. (...) One could even say that intensity arises through precision in matters of detail. That is why precision is both an aesthetic and a moral category. It represents an obligation, the moral imperative of art, so to speak.’

At which point the interviewer asks: ‘And from precision arises in turn—beauty?’ Haneke’s answer: ‘Yes, beauty has nothing to do with prettying something up. Even the fragment is a form and not the opposite of form. One must always find the appropriate form. (...) The measure of artistic value is precision and therein lies pure desire. (...) For that reason alone it is worth working, and that gives rise to enthusiasm. I don’t have to want to please anyone by doing so. I believe that precision per se is pleasing.’⁸

6.

My second witness is Imre Kertész, the Hungarian Nobel-Prize winner, who in his youth survived internment in several concentration camps. This is also the basis of his 1975 novel *Fateless* and is, directly or indirectly, a point of reference for all of his later works. His 2006 work *File K* was the product

of a detailed interview with an editor and friend, which Kertész transformed into an autobiographical dialog that swings back and forth between ego and alter ego, shifting with virtuosity between self-doubt, introspection and self-assertion. At one point, the conversation turns to Adorno's dictum that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. 'I cannot comprehend,' says Kertész,

'that a mind like Adorno can assume that art should refrain from dealing with the greatest trauma of the twentieth century. Should we view the poems of Celan or Miklós Radnóti as barbaric? That is a bad joke, nothing else. And as far as 'aesthetic enjoyment' goes: Does Adorno expect these great poets to write bad poems? The more one analyses this unfortunate sentence, the more nonsensical it becomes.'

Before this passage, the fictitious interviewer asks the author, Kertész, about his narrative *The Union Jack* and remarks that the story seems to 'glorify' what it represents. 'Glorify?' answers Kertész. 'I don't understand what you mean.' His counterpart cites a passage. Kertész repeats his question: 'What is your problem with the text?' The interviewer responds: 'My problem is that I like to read it, that I even enjoy it. Even though the point of *The Union Jack* is the aporia of grasping reality through writing.' The author responds: 'That's not the *only* point of the text. But I'm beginning to understand your point. Whether we like it or not, art always views life as a celebration.' — 'As a carnival or as a funeral?' — 'As a celebration.'

7.

Note that the voice of Kertész does not claim that life is a celebration, but that art *conveys* life as a celebration, however horrible or perverse might be that with which art confronts us. And it is precisely this extreme passage, taken together with Haneke's apology for aesthetic precision and cruelty, which in my opinion teaches us something about the specific success of art. Works of art convey what they present by means of a form that compels the reader, viewer or listener into what is at the same time a captivating and liberating awareness—into a celebration of receptiveness and spontaneity paired with a capacity for fantasy and insight, unlike anything of which other modes of thinking are capable.

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Translated by Joseph Ganahl

NOTES

1. A beautiful chair, by contrast, that is painful to sit in satisfies our aesthetic need

just as little as an ugly chair that is utterly cozy. A chair, after all, is not *just* a sculpture; but as soon as it becomes an object of aesthetic desires, neither is it *only* a useful

- object.
2. Seel 2006, 11-26.
 3. Seel 2007, 82-94.
 4. E.g. E. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton 1999, A. Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton 2007; B. Recki, 'Herabkommen ins Sichtbare. Eine Apologie der Schönheit in pragmatischer Hinsicht', in: R. Konersmann (Hg.), *Das Leben denken—Die Kultur denken*, Bd. 1: Leben, München 2007, 176-196; R. Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2009; K. P. Liessmann, *Schönheit*, Wien 2009; K. H. Bohrer, 'Was kann Kritik sein am Ende der Kunstkritik?', in: *Merkur* 63/2009, 1072-1077; G. Figal, 'Über die Schönheit der modernen Kunst', in: *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* 9/2010, 117-128; C.-S. Mahnkopf, 'Die Schönheit (in) der Musik', in: *Musik & Ästhetik*, 14/2010, H. 55, 5-17; C. Menke, 'Die Schönheit: zwischen Anschauung und Rausch', in: *Die Kraft der Kunst*, Frankfurt/M. 2013, 41-55.
 5. Adorno 1973, p. 21, translation: J.G.
 6. This is a central theme in Seel 1991, 107ff., 169ff.
 7. There is an asymmetry here that we need to be aware of: While an element of beauty inheres in the sublime, beauty—especially in the second sense—can exist without any admixture of the sublime.
 8. Haneke and Assheuer 2008, 46f.

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