

The Ethical and Existential Meaning of Beauty

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Abstract

Ethics and beauty have been neglected subjects in modern artistic and architectural discourse. These essential dimensions have been replaced by performative qualities and a manipulative aestheticization. As visual image and techno-economic criteria have replaced existential concerns, mental meanings, experiences and the sense of empathy have been lost. However, beauty and reason are valid criteria in art, architecture as well as science. Beauty is not an added aesthetic surface value, as it expresses the coherence, wholeness and integrity of the work. We should even acknowledge the existence of an aesthetic intelligence along with ethical, emotional, spiritual and existential intelligences.

Art and architecture are modes of existential thinking about the world and the human situation. They need to create a temporal continuum, an existential tradition, and also include the bio-cultural and evolutionary dimension in their truly humanist visions.

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THE ETHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL MEANING OF BEAUTY

"Art is realistic when it strives to express an ethical idea. Realism is a striving for the truth, and truth is always beautiful. Here aesthetic coincides with the ethical" (Tarkovsky, 1986, p.113).

"Art is not only a selective sampling of the world; art implies transforming the world, an endless modification towards the good" (Rilke, 1997, p.41).¹

BEAUTY, AESTHETICISATION AND NEWNESS

Beauty and ethics, as well as their hidden relationships are, no doubt, unfashionable subjects in today's artistic and architectural discourse. In the era that reveres appealing images and formal inventions, the ethical perspective has been pushed aside, and the ethical dimension has rarely entered recent writings on art and architecture. *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1996) by philosopher Karsten Harries is a rare example in our time of the interest in the ethical dimension of architecture (Harries, 1998). Artistic quality is generally seen as a subjective and unique expression, and instead of suggesting an ethical resonance, it is expected to exhibit unforeseen imagery. In fact, beauty and ethics have been problematic concepts in the arts for a century and a half, and artists have usually questioned or neglected these notions. In our obsessive consumerist culture, beauty has turned into a deliberate aesthetic manipulation and seduction; everything from products to environments, personality to behaviour, and politics to war, is now manipulatively aestheticized. We have entered the era of "aesthetic capitalism" in accordance with the title of a recent book by Gernot Böhme, the German philosopher, who has also pioneered in the philosophical analysis of atmospheres (Böhme, 2016). This new mode of Capitalism implies a distinct calculated manipulation of appearances and the loss of sincerity. Besides, today's formalist and rhetorically dramatized architecture hardly aspires for beauty and serenity, as experiences of the unforeseen, stunning and the *unheimlich*, or of outright imbalance and threat, are frequently more apparent in its imagery.

During the modern era, the requirement for beauty has been replaced by the obsession with newness. Paradoxically, however, even newness turns into repetitiousness. "As the new is searched only because of its newness, everything becomes identical, because it has no other properties but its newness", the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen (1970-) points out in his book *The Philosophy of Boredom* (Svendsen et al., 2005, p.75). However, beauty is always connected with timelessness as it turns our consciousness to permanence and eternity. "The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality", philosopher Karsten Harries (1937-) claims (Harries, 1982). "Beauty connects us with the eternal", as Jorge Luis Borges formulated this thought (Borges, 2002, p.115).

What is the meaning of this forceful distancing of art and architecture from beauty, ethics and life? In his book *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature* (1925), José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) suggests that the subject matter of art has gradually shifted from "things" to "sensations" and, finally, to "ideas" (Ortega y Gasset, 1968). In Ortega's view, this development has gradually weakened the human content in art. Regardless of whether we agree with Ortega's analysis or not, it opens a thought-provoking view into the transformation of the essence of art. This is a shift from concrete and sensory representations to fabricated and cognitive expression. At the same time, they have moved towards the realms of conceptuality and scientific views. In this development, the role of beauty has changed accordingly, and it is difficult to relate sensory representation and phenomenal experience of beauty with the cerebral and instrumentalised ideas in today's artistic expressions. Art and architecture have turned autonomous and self-conscious of their means and ends. Instead of mediating between different realities, art has turned into an autonomous reality. In this development, the role of beauty has changed accordingly, and it is not possible to relate sensory representation and phenomenal experience of beauty with the cerebral and instrumentalised ideas in today's artistic expressions. Not surprisingly, these fundamental changes in artistic thinking and focus also apply in architecture.

THE ETHICS OF LIMITS

Sublime beauty was the highest aspiration of art until the end of the nineteenth century, but the quasi-rational and materialist consumer culture of today regards art as a cultural deviation, entertainment and investment. However, an interest in the connections of ethics and aesthetics, truth and beauty, seems to be re-emerging

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter to Jacob Baron Uexkull, Paris, dated August 19, 1909.

again. The haunting environmental and ecological problems and the consequences of uncritical technological development, such as excessive digitalization, artificial intelligence and genetic manipulation, are also awaking wider ethical concerns. At the same time, however, the attention is shifting from the forced and noisy, but mentally empty architecture of abundance to the ways of building that are emerging in the developing world. This architecture of necessity is bound to be based on real needs, scarcities and necessities. In these ways of building, architectural form still arises from the materials and ways of constructing, not from detached aestheticized ideas and meaningless compositional complexities. While the existential meaning is disappearing from the constructions of the world of surreal wealth, the severely restricted constructions in the realities of need still mediate existential and ethical values. This architecture of limits expresses the beauty of necessity as opposed to the limitless aesthetics and swiftly changing fashions of abundance. Leonardo da Vinci's wise advice on the meaning of limits, "Strength is born from constraints, and it dies in freedom", has regrettably been forgotten (Stravinsky & Oramo, 1968, p.72).

The perspective of approaching ecological, political and moral catastrophes definitely calls for a re-integration of the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. At the same time, our focus needs to shift from the subjective, exclusive and exceptional back to the universal and existential concerns. *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997) of Karsten Harries, as well as several other significant philosophical books of the past few years, such as Elaine Scarry's (1946-) *On Beauty and Being Just* (Scarry, 1999) and Martha Nussbaum's (1947-) *Poetic Justice* (Nussbaum, 1995) also exemplify these concerns. Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), the Nobel Laureate poet, wrote frequently about the interactions of these two mental dimensions and gave the aesthetic perception primacy: "Man is first an aesthetic creature before he is an ethical one" (Brodsky, 1995, p.208). He considers our aesthetic instinct as the origin of ethics: "Every new aesthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more exact, because aesthetics is the mother of ethics". (Brodsky, 1995, p.207) But for the poet, aesthetics means something more universal and autonomous than today's commercialized beauty, serving the purposes of desire, convention, consumption and forced change.

BEAUTY IN SCIENCE

Beauty, reason and truth are usually seen as exclusive and independent properties and notions, but they can well share the same mental and emotive grounding. Beauty and reason seem to be equally valid approaches and criteria of judgement in both science and art. Erich Fromm (1900-1980), philosopher and social psychiatrist, provides a striking expression of the fusion of beauty and truth: "Beauty is not the opposite of the ugly, but of the false".² This viewpoint directly at the interconnection of the aesthetics and ethics criteria.

Aesthetic aspirations are primarily related with the world of the arts, architecture, design and styles, but beauty and elegance of thought are essential criteria also in mathematics, physics and other sciences. Beauty represents comprehensive and synthetic qualities and integrities, which cannot be formalized and expressed through any other means. The experience of convincing and disarming beauty is a proof of the correctness, coherence and inner harmony of the phenomenon also outside of art. The pure and selfless beauty of a Piero della Francesca or Johannes Vermeer painting is likely to be beyond analyses and explanations, as it penetrates every cell of the viewer. "Be like me", is the authoritative demand of great poetry, according to Joseph Brodsky, and this command applies to all art (Brodsky, 1995, p.206).

Beauty is also a quality in mathematics and sciences. The theoretical physicist Paul A.M. Dirac (1902-84) argued that the theories of physics, which project beauty, are probably also the correct ones (Dirac, 1963). Physicist Hermann Weyl (1885-1955), who completed the quantum and probability theories, made an even more outspoken confession: "My work has always attempted to combine truth with beauty, but when I have been obliged to choose one of the two, I have chosen the beautiful".³ Today, mathematicians use the notion "dirty proof" (in the sense of "ugly") of a mathematical proof, which has been attained through immense computing power, beyond the capabilities of human perception and intellectual grasp.⁴ I feel the same "dirtiness" in architectural projects generated by computers or algorithms.

² Erich Fromm, original source unidentified.

³ "In meinen Arbeit habe ich immer versucht, das Wahre mit den Schönen zu vereinen; wenn ich über das Eine oder das Andere entscheiden musste, habe ich stets das Schöne gewählt". The quotation appears above the bust of the Hermann Weyl in the Herman Weyl Zimmer at the ETH in Zürich.

⁴ The notion was used by several of the mathematician presenters at the Simplicity in Arts and Mathematics: Ideals of Practice in Mathematics & the Arts, City University of New York, Graduate Centre, 3 – 5 April 2013.

THE HOLISTIC ESSENCE OF BEAUTY

Beauty is not an added surface value on top of the essence of things, as it expresses the coherence, integrity, wholeness and completeness of the thing or phenomenon. There is no aesthetic reality separate from the realities of things. Our current culture prioritizes power, cerebral capacity and quantification, although emotive reactions and intuitions are often our most synthetic modes of understanding, and beauty arises from the experience of a complex entity as an integrated singularity. The “understanding” of atmospheres is an example of our capacity of grasping unfocused, shapeless and diffuse phenomena. Altogether, we tend to regard perceptions, skills and understanding as processes that advance from details and parts towards entities. This simplistic idea of the dynamics of understanding is regrettably also the prevailing method in education. However, neuroscience has established that we grasp entities first and they give meaning to the parts. This fact of neuroscience shakes the accepted elementarist pedagogical foundations in a fundamental manner. Students of art and design, for instance, should first be made to encounter real and complete works of art, and only later given detailed intellectual analyses of the artistic phenomena. The individual sensory experience of the work has to precede its conceptual analyses and cognitive understanding. “According to the right hemisphere, understanding is derived from the whole, since it is only in the light of the whole that one can truly understand the nature of the parts”, Iain McGilchrist (1953), therapist and philosopher, argues (McGilchrist, 2009, p.142).

Beauty is a complete judgement of a thing in the same way that we grasp the characteristics of places and vast environmental situations through our unfocused atmospheric sense. As I enter a space the space enters me. “I enter a building, see a room, and – in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it”, Peter Zumthor confesses (Zumthor, 2006, p.13). Beauty is an immaterial experiential quality, which suggests a distinct “thingness”- the sensuous and mental thingness of beauty. At the same time that beauty arises from the integration of things, it appears to have its independent existence. As the light artist James Turrell has argued, also light can project a “thingness” in our experience (Turrell & Poole, 2000, p.1-2) Beauty, like atmosphere, is a complex experiential quality, which is encountered and grasped in a synthetic, embodied, multi-sensory and emotional manner, rather than understood through intellectual and analytic reading. As we experience beauty, it does not remain outside of us, but becomes part of our very being.

Phenomena and creatures of nature are beautiful. As products of timeless evolution, they are complete, integrated and self-sufficient entities. The time dimension in reality is surprisingly little understood outside of mere historical chronology. Altogether, we should finally acknowledge that emotions and experiences of beauty are a domain of “existential intelligence”, implying a comprehensive judgement of the perceived phenomenon. By this notion I refer to the powerful notion of Merleau-Ponty, “the flesh of The World” Mark Johnson (1949-), philosopher, makes the significant remark: “There is no cognition without emotion, even though we are often unaware of the emotional aspect of our thinking” (Johnson, 2007, p.9). In his view, emotions are the source of primordial meaning: “Emotions are not second-rate cognitions; rather they are affective patterns of our encounter with our world, by which we take the meaning of things at a primordial level” (Johnson, 2007, p.18). Emotions unify ethical and aesthetic qualities and give them their lived existential meanings. “It is only with the heart that one can see right. What is essential is invisible to the eye, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) asserts (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943).

INTELLIGENCE AND EXPERIENCE

In his book *Intelligence Reframed* psychologist Howard Gardner (1943-) identifies ten categories of intelligence beyond the characteristics measured by the standard IQ test: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, inter-personal and intra-personal, naturalistic, ethical and spiritual intelligence (Gardner, 1999, p.41). Based on my personal experiences and intuitions, I wish to add four further categories - aesthetic, emotional, atmospheric, and existential -intelligences to this already thought-provoking list of the psychologist. It is evident that even in the creative fields and their education, the complexities of human intelligence, embodied and emotional capacities, and the essences of the phenomena of beauty and ethical judgement are hardly understood, not to speak of the complex and unconscious nature of creative processes.

The poetic and artistic reality of a work of art is not in the material and physical object, but in its internalization through individual experience; beauty has to be experienced and felt. “Nothing is real until it has been experienced”, as the poet John Keats (1795-1821)

wrote.⁵This is also the seminal view of John Dewey's (1859-1952) book *Art as Experience* of 1934: "In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favourable to understanding [...] When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals" (Dewey, 2008).

Art articulates and expresses the world of lived experiences, and it mediates the human mental essence of these very encounters. A true artist is not depicting an isolated detail or aspect of the world. Every real artistic work is a microcosm, a complete world of its own, or in the words of Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86), the film director, "a whole world as reflected in a drop of water" (Tarkovsky, 1986, p.110). Every true work of art, including architecture, projects an entire world.

ART AND THE WORLD

I wish to argue firmly that art is not merely aestheticisation, as it is a form of genuine existential thinking about the world and our being in that very world, through embodied and poeticized images and means characteristic to the art form in question. "How would the poet or the painter express anything other than his encounter with the world", Maurice Merleau-Ponty asks pointing out the existential focus of art (Kearney, 1994).⁶ How could the architect express anything else; we need to ask accordingly. Significantly, like Dewey, the philosopher does not regard the material or performed work itself as the objective of art. "We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work", he states (McGilchrist, 2009, p.409).⁷ This view turns art into a mediating act; it tells primarily of something else than of itself; the meaning of art is always behind and beyond the work itself. This position also rejects the common idea of art as the artist's self-expression. Indeed, art is a relational medium, which tells us about the essences of the lived world, or perhaps more precisely, about being a human in this world. Balthus (Balthazar Klossowsky de Rola, 1908-2001), one of the finest realist painters of last century, points out the significance of the world as the artist's true subject: "If a work only expresses the person who created it, it wasn't worth doing [...] Expressing the world, understanding it, that is what seems interesting to me" (Claude, 1996, p.18).⁸ In another context the painter articulates his position further: "Great painting has to have universal meaning. This is no longer so today and that is why I want to give painting back its lost universality and anonymity, because the more anonymous a painting is, the more real it is" (Claude, 1996, p.18). This is a thought-provoking argument against the understanding of art as self-expression or conscious aestheticisation.

ART AND ITS PAST

Here again the ethical perspective enters the domain of art and architecture. Like all art, the art of building is simultaneously about the lived world and the layered histories and meanings of the artform itself. All arts carry their timeless traditions along their route towards the future. Meaningful works are always conversations across time, and truly radical works open up new ways of reading and experiencing works of art. Picasso has opened our eyes to see the 25.000 years old cave paintings. All great artists reveal the existential essence of art through the layers of recorded history of art. Aldo van Eyck refused to give his inaugural lecture on the suggested topic of the influence of Giotto on Cézanne and gave the lecture on the influence of Cézanne on Giotto, instead.⁹

As a consequence of this multiple perspective, also architecture needs to have a double focus, the lived world and the mythical traditions of constructing. The highly refined technologies of today tend to weaken the deep unconscious meanings and hidden mythical contents of building, which are echoed in all great architectural works. All meaningful works are timeless, and they are always simultaneously about the past, present and future.

A BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The aesthetic reality has also been extended to biological phenomena. It has been well known that certain selective criteria, that could be regarded as aesthetic choices, such

⁵ John Keats, Keats quotes, Google.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted in Richard Kearney, in *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted in Iain McGilchrist, in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*

⁸ Balthus (Balthazar Klossowsky de Rola), Claude Roy, Balthus

⁹ Aldo van Eyck in private conversation with the author in 1989.

as symmetry and signs of health and strength, are essential factors in mate selection among animals. Certain "aesthetic" gestures, rituals and deliberate constructions are also used to attract a mate, such as the empty silk balloon of the Balloon fly (*Hilara sartor*), the huge staged and decorated nests of the bowerbirds (*Ptilonorhynchidae*),¹⁰ and the co-ordinated group singing and dancing by male Blue manakins (*Chiroxipia caudata*) (Prum, 2018).

A recent book *The Evolution of Beauty* by Richard O. Prum (1961-) re-introduces Charles Darwin's second book on evolution entitled *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* published in 1871 (Darwin, 1871), published 13 years after his celebrated *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1859). Darwin published his second book after becoming convinced that the selective principles in his first theory could not explain all the variations among animal species, including the proverbial case of the peacock's tail, which had caused Darwin nightmares at the time of writing *The Origin of Species*. In the Victorian era, a book that suggested autonomous aesthetic choice as sexual motif, practiced by the female sex, could not even be discussed. However, scientists have recently shown through mathematical modelling that, indeed, combining the two theories of Darwin fully explains all the variety among animal species, including the peacock's tail. Surprisingly, an individual aesthetic judgement is a principle of choice also in the animal world.

The notion of *Biophilia*, "the science and ethics of life," introduced and articulated by the biologist Edward O. Wilson (1929-), expands the ethical responsibility beyond the realm of human interaction, all the way to our duty in maintaining biodiversity (Wilson, 1984). Semir Zeki, a pioneering neurobiologist also connects aesthetics with biological evolution, as he suggests the feasibility of "a theory of aesthetics that is biologically based in his book *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Zeki, 1999, p.1-2). With the intuition and courage of a poet, Joseph Brodsky supports the scientist's view: "The purpose of evolution, believe it or not, is beauty, which survives it all and generates truth simply by being a fusion of the mental and the sensual" (Brodsky, 1995, p.206).

BEAUTY, EMPATHY AND INTEGRITY

We have an amazing unconscious capacity to identify ourselves with other living creatures and even with objects and phenomena of our perceptions, such as human and spatial situations, and to project ourselves and emotions onto them. "Be like me", is the imperative of the poem in Joseph Brodsky's view.¹¹ We even simulate the individual human characters of great novels and momentarily share their fates, lives, life situations and emotions. Experiencing a work of art is an exchange, the work lends us its authority and magic, and we lend the work our emotions. Neuroscience has associated this act of unconscious mirroring and exchange with our "mirror neurons" (De Waal, 2010).

Somewhat unexpectedly, empathy is a capacity that also animals possess, as Frans de Waal's book *The Age of Empathy* argues. The recent research on the chemical communication and collaboration of trees and mushrooms extends the realm of purposeful communication far beyond our own mental worlds (Wohlleben, 2020).

The great ethical value and human equality of art is that we are able to experience our own emotions mirrored by the most profound and sensitive minds in human history. We do not only reflect the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the living, as our empathic imagination can also bring the dead back to life. We can sense through the skin, muscles and emotions of Michelangelo, see through the eyes of Piero della Francesca, hear through the ears of Johann Sebastian Bach, and feel through the heart of Rainer Maria Rilke. As the master poet Rilke suggests in the motto of my essay, art and beauty are not only adjectives, but they also constitute the very core of humane and dignified life.

Beauty is a synthetic and integrated character and quality of a phenomenon, akin to the human ethical quality of integrity. The notion of integrity also refers to the singularity, inner coherence and autonomy of a thing, behaviour or phenomenon. In 1954, at the age of 85, Frank Lloyd Wright formulated the mental task of architecture followingly: "What is needed most in architecture today is the very thing that is most needed in life – integrity. Just as it is in a human being, so integrity is the deepest quality in a building [...] If we succeed, we will have done a great service to our moral nature - the psyche - of our democratic society [...] Stand up for integrity in your building and you stand for integrity not only in the life of those who did the buildings but socially a reciprocal relationship in inevitable" (Wright, 1954; Wright, Kaufman, & Raeburn, 1960, p.292-300).

¹⁰ For decoration in animal constructions, see: Pallasmaa, J. (Ed.). (1995). *Animal Architecture*. Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

¹¹ Mirror-neurons were discovered by the research group of Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese in the University of Parma over thirty years ago.

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