International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
"Aesthetics Bridging Cultures"

Use, Abuse and a different experience of Beauty

Alexandra Mouriki, Assistant Professor, University of Patras, Greece

Beauty dethroned

"We have… to recognize that 'beauty' has receded or even disappeared from contemporary aesthetic theory. For like any other once influential ideas, it has simply faded away", Stolnitz declared in 1962[1], giving the general tone which was adopted by the philosophical discourse at that time and become widely spread during the last decades of the 20th century and until recently. Beauty became irrelevant to aesthetic theory as it had become to art. It ceased to be of interest either for the philosophical thought or for artistic practice. And, what is more, it was discredited as useless, confusing or even suspect:

> There is something suspect ('phony') about 'beauty'. Artists seem to get along quite well without it: it is the café haunters, the preachers, the metaphysicians, and the calendar-makers who talk of beauty… 'Beauty' is always nice; always soothing; it is what the bourgeoisie pay the artist for… it is the refuge of the metaphysician finding a home for art in his harmonious universe…[2]

It is interesting to see in this passage from Passmore the double dishonour of beauty: a) beauty doesn't have anything to do with art since art has proved that it can do well without it (best pictures and other works of art are often obviously not beautiful; many of them are even ugly); b) beauty is connected with metaphysics and its ideal of a harmonious universe, expressing thus wrong values and being connected to a distorted idea of the way the world has to be (harmonious and non conflicted). Consequently, beauty is a useless idea that had to be dumped altogether and aesthetics – which traditionally had been determined as a reflective study of beauty or as this philosophical discipline that aims to establish the general principles of art and beauty[3] – is considered as problematic and outdated.

It was around 60s, when this strong wave of doubt began to question aesthetics (both in the Anglo-Saxon world, where research was directed towards issues dealing with the definition of art, as well as in continental philosophy where it developed into a confrontation with traditional aesthetic theories, meanings and categories). The concept of aesthetics was disputed, although this dispute was set within a wider context of heated arguments about arts, their status, their role and their place in contemporary conditions etc. There was a general scepticism concerning the significance of the aesthetic –which more or less was identified with the beautiful – for a philosophical aesthetic theory. Aesthetic was called a myth[4], an invention of modernity that we very well could do without favouring a more precise description and analysis of the elements distinguishing arts from other fields of human endeavour. It was argued that when we talk about art we shouldn't do it in terms of aesthetic perception and experience. Philosophical aesthetics could finally be-

come ‘de-aestheticised’ and thus enfranchised from that misunderstanding which, as some argued, connected aesthetics, as far back as the time of its first appearance as an autonomous branch of philosophy, with a narrow formalistic conception of the aesthetic as almost identical with the ‘beautiful form’. Now one could, or better yet ought to, develop theories on art with non aesthetic or beyond aesthetic terms, in other words theories that examine art outside its aesthetic merit, outside the aspect of aesthetic responses and experiences that art is capable to produce.

It is true: beauty has faded away but not that simply as Stolnitz believed. This fading was not just the result of a conceptual clarification as if philosophy had come to realise something which was gone unnoticed till then. The story of beauty’s dethronement is longer than usually thought. We can search for its starting point in the late 19th century, at the very moment when beauty was exalted and worshiped as the only value making life worth living – it was the period of aestheticism’s blossoming. It was at that time exactly when Rimbaud, paradoxically enough, wrote in his *A Season in Hell*: “One evening, I sat Beauty on my knees; and I found her bitter, and I abused her”. The “bitterness of beauty” became epidemic among the avant-garde artists of the following century, but it was a rare thought in 1873 when Rimbaud published this poem, as Danto notes[5]. It was a thought intuitively anticipating the revolt against beauty at the beginning of the 20th century. Abusing beauty, Rimbaud was committing an offence against morality since beauty was considered as a symbol of the morally good. And that is why he became the artistic and moral hero for certain avant-garde artists of the 20th century. These artists, most of all the Dadaists, disconnected beauty from art

> “as an expression of moral revulsion against a society for whom beauty was a cherished value, and which cherished art itself because of beauty[6]”.

Dadaistic ‘abuse of beauty’ was thus a moral reaction as well as a political action against a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries, as Tristan Tzara was saying in his Dadaist manifesto of 1918. And by this action, which was translated in an ephemeral art, Dada categorically refused to be found beautiful. It opened an unbridgeable gap between art and beauty, repeating in a more vivid and aggressive way the gesture of Marcel Duchamp, who was the first to bring out the conceptual disconnection between art and aesthetics in his ready-mades of 1913-1915. Marcel Duchamp showed that painting was something else than a retinal shudder, that art shouldn’t be taken as exclusively aiming to the pleasure of the senses and opened thus the way to contemporary art. With him, as well as with the other avant-garde movements, the ‘Age of Aesthetics’, as it had been conceived during the 18th and 19th centuries, came to its end. After that, beauty became more and more downgraded up to its total disappearance around the 60s. Gerhard Richter recalls that one writer claimed that if he painted sex and violence, it would have been okay, but one wasn’t allowed to paint anything beautiful[7]. A complete reversal had taken place. The idea of beauty which had almost dominated artistic reality became a stigma that the artists should shake off them and their work. The abuse of beauty was considered thus as an enfranchisement from this ‘toxic’ notion; this abuse was in fact an attack on beauty, which ended up in its triumphal dethronement.

Aesthetics irrelevance

Beauty disappeared from art and this disappearance stained philosophical aesthetics as well. The elimination of beauty in art was rather erroneously considered as an evidence

of aesthetics irrelevance. It is this sentence to irrelevance that constitutes the abuse of beauty in philosophical aesthetical level. Art was disconnected from beauty and aesthetic theories, considered as theories on beauty, were proclaimed insufficient for the study of art. Aesthetic theories, as Noël Carroll[8] argues, dominated the area of aesthetic philosophy because of a misunderstanding; theories about beauty (such as those from Hutcheson or Kant) were erroneously perceived as theories on art, resulting in a reduced perception of what should be expected by our contact with art. This contact was thus assumed to be a disinterested contact with the formal qualities of a work of art. Of course, when Kant analysed the principles used to formulate judgments on beauty wasn't trying to produce a theory on art (it is common knowledge that Kant's theory on beauty transcends pure art to cover the beauty of nature, which he exemplifies) and in any case it's not at all certain that his analysis on beauty leads necessarily to a formalistic aesthetic approach. This approach was probably the result of rather selective and possibly constrained interpretations of Kantian theory on beauty, as the one by Clive Bell. Clive Bell transferred Kant's perceptions on form and disinterestedness into a theory on art, thus introducing a strict aesthetic formalism which was subsequently connected to artistic modernism. Key-concepts from the theory on beauty (form and disinterested pleasure) were transferred into art theory and directed philosophical aesthetics towards an "aesthetic" orientation. This led to the systematic reduction of art theory into aesthetic theory, which, as Carroll argues, leads to a de facto reduction into a theory on beauty[9], as it was expressed during the 18th century. Rejection of aesthetic theory thus (that theory which was developed under the prism of aesthetical = beautiful) was considered –within the context of that criticism– as a positive departure from a fallacy. It was considered as liberation from, as some thought, the tyranny of modern aesthetics' claim for autonomy, from its hermetic seclusion and persistence for its field purity as well as its ensuing refusal to mingle with other forms of culture.

In the last decades of the 20th century, criticism on aesthetics became even more radical. Viewed from the area of cultural studies as well as from various trends of post-modern thought, aesthetics is approached as ideology, deemed as retrograde and oppressive, accused of being discriminatory –since it allegedly concerns only those few who are capable of identifying aesthetic quality. It is repudiated as fetishist and confusing since it mystifies, as some argue, the value of art, imposing art as a preferential area for the emergence of higher values, thus isolating art from its historical, social or political context. It shows conceit and failure to recognize that which is not similar to us. Thus the retreat or even the removal of aesthetic takes, from that point of view, a positive character.

Is aesthetics still possible?

And yet, something seems changing the last two decades. More and more the last few years it is asked whether aesthetics is still possible. Many theoreticians re-examine the issue of aesthetics, talk about rediscovery or return of aesthetics, attempt to expand aesthetics beyond aesthetics[10], underscore the need to reconsider the foundations of aesthetics and set new directions for aesthetics today[11]. Well-known philosophers and aestheticians underline the need to revisit the aesthetic experience[12] and examine the relevance or irrelevance of the aesthetic with art[13]. The aesthetic that Passmore condemned as "dreary", the one Sparshott considered a formless conception, vague and loose in application[14], the same that Danto emphatically argues that has nothing to do with the definition of art, returns to claim its rightful place in the fields of philosophy and critical theory[15], as well as artistic creation. The idea of beauty is also re-introduced in the discussions about

art and aesthetics. Some wish to restore it[16], others wonder about beauty's reality[17] or even try to formulate a metaphysics of beauty[18]. And one cannot but wonder: what does this return mean? After all these reservations and disputes, is there any room left to formulate an aesthetics which manages to rise above the mounting waves of criticism at theoretical level and able to confront the multiplicity of all available forms of contemporary artistic expression? An aesthetics, i.e., that needs to assume the duty to describe and comprehend this extremely mobile world, which is ours, this world of digital imagery and developing arts within virtual reality?

Traditional aesthetics, claimed A. Danto in a recent discussion concerning aesthetics at the present time, is not appropriate for contemporary art, although aesthetics, in a general sense, remains pertinent[19]. I claim that aesthetics is indeed pertinent provided that we make an effort to overcome aesthetics' abuse and to understand that *aesthetics is something more than what is conventionally acknowledged that it is;* (and then, into this reshaped field of aesthetics, beauty would be re-considered as well or better yet, re-claimed on a new ground).

This can be achieved only if we identify the blank spots and errors that marked the development of modern aesthetics and restore the aesthetic, purged from the weight of all those misconceptions associated with it during the modernistic period as well as the more recent period of doubt and criticism. In other words, on condition that aesthetic thought turns to itself in reflection and strives to clarify the nature of the aesthetic. Continue

The problem with critical approaches of "aesthetic" philosophical aesthetics is that they remain restrained by the same misconception they bring to light: they continue to identify aesthetic with beauty in its narrow sense, as mere pleasure of the senses, while at the same time they go on emphasizing how restrictive this narrow approach of aesthetics was. Furthermore, they appear to overlook the other dimension of the "aesthetic", the one undermined by the erroneous insistence to equate "aesthetic" with a narrow formalistic orientation. Danto –this ardent critic of aesthetics– says that the very notion of aesthetic undervaluates art, presenting art as something that is strictly related to pleasure, not with meaning and truth[20]. The cognitive dimension of aesthetic is thus summarily dismissed resulting in one more misconception with serious repercussions on aesthetics, taking a place next to –and in relation to– the views equating aesthetic with beauty in its narrow formal sense. Yet, the meaning of aesthetics is relative to the cognitive from the start, with Baumgarten[21] as well as Kant.

Born of the spirit and born again

It is therefore the duty of philosophical aesthetics (which assumes also the duty to be a philosophical approach to art even within the complexity of the modern world of art) to:

- Show how a simplistic interpretation of past theories of beauty, Kant's especially, separated rational from aesthetic judgment, and led to the view that aesthetic experience, as experience of beauty, is connected exclusively with the immediacy of pleasure (disinterested pleasure of form, disassociated from any cognitive content).

It was in the early 90s when the author and art critic Dave Hickey used a provocative tone to suggest that the "issue of the nineties" would be "beauty[22]". Although his prognosis was not entirely accurate, artistic production appeared to ease up on guilty feelings for creating "beautiful forms". At the same time art philosophers, theoreticians and historians

felt it was time to re-examine the issue of aesthetics and directed their interest towards the conditions needed to resume the discussion on "aesthetics" and beauty. It would be interesting to see here how Danto, the philosopher who more than anyone else criticised the notion of the aesthetic, returns to it and puts the question concerning beauty (which, till then, he had neglected in favour of art ontology and philosophical history of art) in the centre of his thought[23]. Danto's approach can be seen as a clear indication for the reorientation of philosophic theory towards aesthetic and at the same time shows its ambivalence in relation to aesthetics and its puzzlement as to how much and how aesthetic is related to art, a puzzle that will remain unsolved as long as theory finds it difficult to accept the wider "aesthetic" dimensions of what is aesthetic. Refusing to comprehend that "aesthetic is always something more than aesthetic[24]", theory remains constrained by its own doubts regarding the degree of aesthetic involvement in defining art and art experience.

Despite Danto's intent to re-evaluate his views on aesthetics and acknowledge that works of art have qualities, which may lead to a certain response or attitude by those who perceive art works in relation to their meaning, subject or content – qualities that "inflect" the meaning of works of art, as he says[25] – he remains uncertain as to how much aesthetically perceived qualities are essential for works of art. This uncertainty is caused by the fact that he is unable to really depart from identifying aesthetic with beautiful (in its constrained formal sense) and aesthetic experience with non cognitive, feelings driven, reaction to visual stimuli (Danto uses examples taken exclusively from visual arts, mainly from painting). He thus suggests to retain the concept of beauty but only in reference to its aesthetic identity (that is, only in relation to senses) and give art that which – in its highest instances – belongs to thought. Although it is valid to associate art with thought, this limited view of what is aesthetic remains problematic. However, if he didn't refuse to grant aesthetic a cognitive dimension then he could accept that aesthetic is an experience relative to thought or better yet fulfilled by it. He could grasp aesthetic in a broader sense, reattaching it to thought, as when Hegel, referring to the beauty of art, said it is something "born of the spirit and born again[26]" and Danto likes to repeat in his later writings, defending the correlation between aesthetic in art and thought[27]. It would then be clear that beauty was born and reborn of the spirit and an answer would be given to the alleged inconsistency of Hegelian conception that beauty in art is something born of the spirit but at the same time something that appeals directly to the senses, feelings and imagination, as something that goes beyond the sphere of thought and requires an instrument other than scientific thought. At this junction we could turn to Kant, much maligned for the "narrow aesthetic scope" adopted by modern aesthetics, to clarify the character and quality of beauty in arts. A review of Kant's thoughts on aesthetic ideas may allow us to comprehend how beauty is born of the spirit, binding our cognitive abilities in non instrumental and non definitive ways.

A different experience of beauty

Revisiting Kant's theory of art –which ironically art philosophers and theoreticians sidestep in formulating their own theories on art – would permit to discover a notion of the aesthetic and beauty far wider than is considered to be. Kant, bringing the aesthetic under the authority of reflective judgements, shows how aesthetic experience should be conceived as a grasp of *meanings* through the senses. He claims that the notion of aesthetic experience is based not only on sensation but on reflection as well:

> "The universal communicability of a pleasure already includes in its concept that this must not be a pleasure of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but one of reflection; and thus aesthetic

art, as beautiful art, is one that has the reflecting power of judgment and not mere sensation as its standard".[28]

Response to the form then, means to comprehend a meaning presented aesthetically, i.e., via images which do not represent what lies in concepts but *something else*[29]; via representations of the imagination which allow the addition to a concept of much that is *unnamable* and the *feeling* of which animate the cognitive faculties[30]. Aesthetic images tell us more than determinate linguistic expression can tell, permit us to think more than we can express in a concept determined by words[31]. It is that *something else*, that *feeling of the unnamable*, that *more* which ascribes uniqueness to aesthetic experience and restores beauty – at least artistic beauty – in its full significance. From this point of view art's aesthetic dimension is not removed but rather associated with its cognitive dimension elevating art experience into something much more significant and more substantial than the "retinal shudder", which Duchamp impugned. There are more aspects to art than visual miracles and these aspects aren't more than aesthetic; *aesthetic is something more than what is being perceived under the prism of its conventional misinterpretation.*

Aesthetic experience therefore is revealed as that rich, multidimensional experience (sensuous, emotive as well as cognitive), into the framework of which, beauty would be recuperated (after the long adventure of its abuse) and its critical content fully unfolded. Beauty is not to be conceived any more as connected to the mere pleasure of the senses but as something stimulating thought as well and opening to different ways of grasping meanings than the conventional ones. It would be a reminiscence of a different contact with the world and nature. To remember Adorno, beauty is that unyielding hint to the longed unity of truth and happiness; that promise of new possibilities, of scarcely envisioned openings in experience emancipated from the world of exchange, as Isobel Armstrong has recently phrased it[32]. Beauty thus is not a given thing; it's not even an is; it's a want, an inextinguishable nostalgia for the realisation of a promise for something which is not and of which art gives a trace. And although art is not necessarily beautiful, it is this experience of beauty it offers that can direct to an inner understanding of the possibility to transform certain aspects of our relation to the world.

It is maybe time for contemporary philosophical aesthetics to re-examine beauty as a claim. The experience of beauty nowadays shouldn't be condemned as a false reconciliation with an alienated world (as the representatives of the 20th century avant-gardes had thought it was); it would rather be treated as a claim for a radical change of perspective in this commodified world where beauty risks to vanish again only this time by an excess of commercialised beautification.

Alexandra Mouriki

University of Patras
Early Childhood Education Department
Mailing address: 21, Meletiou Piga St.
116 36 Athens
Greece
E-mail: mouriki@upatras.gr

[1] Stolnitz, Jerome. "Beauty. Some Stages in the History of the Idea". *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (2). 185.
[2] Passmore, J. A. "The Dreariness of Aesthetics". In W. Elton, ed. *Aesthetics and Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954. 36-55.
[3] See for example the *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) or the *Academic American Encyclopedia* (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Inc., 1993. Vol. 1).
[4] Characteristic example is the case of George Dickie who talks about the phantom of aesthetic experience and the myth of aesthetic attitude, expressing, in a rather explicit manner, the wider scepticism regarding the relevance of "aesthetics" in understanding and forming comprehensive definitions on art. See Dickie, George. "Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience", *Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1965). 129-136 and form the same author; *Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Cornell University Press, 1974.
[5] See Danto, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty*. The Paul Carus Lecture Series 21, Chicago and Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2003. 39.
[6] Ibid. 48.
[7] Quoted by Arthur Danto. Op. cit. 27.
[8] Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
[9] Ibid. 32-33.
[10] Wolfgang Welsch speaks about "aesthetics beyond aesthetics" (Welsch, Wolfgang. *Undoing Aesthetics*. London: Sage, 1997) and attempts to extend aesthetics beyond art to society and the life-world.
[11] Cf. for example, Berleant, Arnold. *Rethinking Aesthetics*, Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004.
[12] See Shusterman, Richard. "The End of Aesthetic Experience". *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1999). 29-41; Iseminger, Gary. "Aesthetic Experience". *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Jerrold Levinson Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Fenner, David. *The Aesthetic Attitude*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1996.
[13] Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics*. op. cit.; Lind, Richard. "The Aesthetic Essence of Art". *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, 1992. 117-129.
[14] Sparshott, Francis. *The Theory of the Arts*. Princeton Univ. Press, 1982. 472-3.
[15] Levine, George. "Introduction: Reclaiming the Aesthetic". In George Levine, ed. *Aesthetics and Ideology*.New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994; Michaud, Yves. *Critères esthétiques et Jugement de goût*. Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1999 ; Ferry, Luc. *Homo æstheticus. L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique*. Paris: Grasset, 1990 ; Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *L'art de l'âge moderne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992 ; Iseminger, Gary. "Aesthetic Appreciation". *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1981). 389-399.
[16] See Mothersill, Mary. *Beauty Restored*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
[17] Zemach, Eddy. *Real Beauty*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
[18] Zangwill, Nick. *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
[19] Danto, A. C., "Les significations incarnées comme idées esthétiques". In *L' esthétique aujourd'hui*, Figures de l' art n° 10).
[20] See Danto, A. C. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University Press, 1986. 13. This is the reason why Danto questions every attempt to define art via aesthetic qualities. In *The Transfiguration of the Common Place* (Danto, Arthur. *The Transfiguration of the Common Place*. Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press, 1981) supports the view to cut the umbilical cord connecting art and aesthetics. Beauty, he argues, is not a parameter to define art, anything that possesses aesthetic qualities is not necessarily a work of art and subsequently a work of art is not identified as such by some inherent aesthetic qualities. Identifying an object as a work of art can't be made in perceptual – aesthetic terms, it is necessary to resort to something else, thought and philosophy. We don't "perceive" something as work of art; we interpret it as such within the frame of an "atmosphere of art theory".
[21] Initially Baumgarten didn't develop his aesthetics as philosophy of art. Creating and understanding works of arts had served in his programme as an example – albeit preferentially – for the application of his philosophy. He exemplified cognitio sensitiva as ars (art with is ancient Greek meaning): art is not passive acceptance of mimicry but action and expression. What Baumgarten tried to do was to propose an alternative philosophy on knowledge that moves beyond purely rationalistic, empirical or perceptual approaches, as noted by Stephen Gross, (Gross, Stephen. "The Neglected Programme of Aesthetics". *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002). 403-414.) In reference to beauty, it's not connected with a sense of beauty, it's an intellectual category closely related to his theory of cognition and knowledge.
[22] See Hickey, Dave ."Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty". In Bill Beckley &David Shapiro, ed. *Uncontrollable Beauty, Toward a New Aesthetic*. New York: Allworth Press, 1998. 15-24. In the introduction of this

article, Hickey explains how, answering to a question addressed by a student who was soliciting his opinion as to what "the issue of the nineties" would be (during a panel discussion on the subject "What's Happening Now"), he said, rather improvising and adopting a provocative tone, that the issue of the nineties would be beauty. See also: Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Art Issues Press, 1994).

[23] See Danto, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty*. Op. cit.

[24] In this section I slightly paraphrase Dewey's words that an "aesthetic experience is always more than aesthetic". Of course this uncompromising declaration by Dewey for the character and function of the core of aesthetic experience is presented within a different context – the context of his own pragmatist experience – referring to variety of materials comprising aesthetic experience derived by various sectors of human experience. In any case, he underscores the concise and not narrow "aesthetic" character of aesthetic experience. See Dewey, John. *Art as Experience,* in the collective publication of John Dewey's later works: Dewey, John. *The Later Works*, 1925-1953, Vol. 10. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987/1934. 329-330).

[25] See. Danto, A. C. *The Abuse of Beauty*. Op. cit. 121.

[26] This rather dark phrase, as noted by many Hegel researchers, comes from his Introduction to Aesthetics and reads: "The beauty of art is beauty *born of the spirit and born again*, and the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature" (Hegel. *Introduction to Aesthetics* (Being The Introduction to the Berlin Aesthetics Lectures of the 1820s. Translated by T. M. Knox with an Interpretative Essay by Charles Karelis). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. 2.)

[27] See Danto, A. C. *The Abuse of Beauty*. Op. cit. 12-15.

[28] Cf. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. (Edited by P. Guyer, translated by P. Guyer & E. Matthews). Cambridge University Press, 2000, §44. 185 (5: 306).

[29] *Op. cit*., §49, p. 193 (5: 315).

[30] *Op. cit*., §49, p. 194 (5: 316).

[31] Ibid.

[32] See Armstrong, Isobel. *The Radical Aesthetic*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000. 186.