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Introduction: Interdisciplinary Discussions on Beauty

Tuuli Lähdesmäki

Discussions on beauty have a long history. The essence, manifestations, perception, and experience of beauty have interested man throughout the history of civilization. Changes in these discussions reflect paradigmatic changes in philosophy, science, and culture. The notion of beauty comprises opposing qualities by being simultaneously a timeless idea penetrating all cultures and a profoundly historical concept, whose focuses, definitions, and contents change in the process of time and vary between different cultural contexts. Despite its ambivalent nature, the significance of beauty for man is undeniable: it is a driving force in cultural production and creative thinking and a source of diverse emotions ranging from exhilaration to religious devoutness.

Although the idea of beauty is commonly approached within the theoretical frame of aesthetics and discussed in relation to art, cultural products, and everyday phenomena people find beautiful, the idea of beauty is also important for various other approaches to the world. Beauty is an interdisciplinary topic which is discussed and explored in diverse disciplines. These discussions manifest the ambiguousness of the concept; its meanings and role as an explanatory power of diverse tangible and intangible phenomena vary between disciplines and their theoretical points of view.

Various scholars have sought to outline the different qualities of the idea of beauty and classify the diverse meanings of the concept. For example, Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards list in their book *The Meaning of Meaning* sixteen definitions of the concept, each of which brings to the fore a different aspect of beauty by emphasizing features such as form, mimesis, an ability to produce pleasure, psychological effect, etc.¹ It is therefore easy to notice that beauty is a *traveling concept*. Mieke Bal has used the metaphor of traveling to describe ambiguous concepts whose functions, uses, and the contexts in which the concept becomes important and meaningful change over the course of time, and which are therefore in a constant state of flux.² Beauty is a concept that travels within and between distinct scholarly discourses and social and cultural domains. Changes in the use of the word throughout time reveal the historicity of the concept and the transformation of the world views related to it.

In different languages the word 'beauty' may connote different meanings. Dictionaries aim to explain the word by offering various synonyms for beauty and its derivatives. As Władysław Tatarkiewicz points out, these derivatives are merely cognates of it – it seems that beauty does not possess any synonyms.³ However, the co-words or co-concepts (or given 'synonyms') used in parallel with the word beauty indicate what kinds of meanings and ideas are included in it within a specific historical moment. The meanings of beauty change when it is discussed in

relation to, e.g., harmony, grace, sublimity, elegance, sweetness, picturesqueness, mystique, pleasure, emotion, sense, reason, truth, spirituality, love, etc.

In ancient Greek philosophy, discussions on beauty usually intertwined with other topics, such as morality. The word *kalos* referred not only to beautiful and pleasing objects, shapes, colours, or sounds, but also to beautiful thoughts, customs, laws, etc. In addition the word encompassed meanings equivalent to good, worthy, and noble.⁴ The broad conception of *kalos*, which thereby included both aesthetics and ethics, was later taken over by Medieval and modern thinkers who developed further the conceptual and terminological apparatus of the Greek philosophers. The theoretical basis of this conception relied on proportions, order, and the arrangement of parts and their interrelationship to the whole.⁵ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz calls this theoretical notion of beauty the Great Theory of European aesthetics, as its main idea persisted for centuries in broader or narrower versions in European philosophical thinking. The Great Theory was finally ousted by the combined pressure of empirical philosophy and romantic trends in art in the eighteenth century.⁶ The new conception emphasized beauty in an aesthetic sense: the notion of beauty was extended to include phenomena which evoke an aesthetic experience.⁷

The *location* of beauty has been discussed since Antiquity. The theoretical and philosophical discussions have included diverse views on it: beauty has been explained as being located, e.g., in the form of objects, harmonious relationships and order, function, human perception and experience, thought, divinity, biology, culture, etc. Already Plato introduced the idea that man can improve and become trained in perceiving beauty. In *Symposium*, priestess Diotima describes how a perceiver can progress from perceiving beauty in the form of objects and people to perceiving beauty in more abstract contexts.⁸ As Plato suggests, the location of beauty is not stable but varies according to the beholder's skills.

The ousting of the Great Theory of beauty in the eighteenth century had an effect on the theoretical discussions on the location of beauty. Several philosophers, such as David Hume, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, discussed beauty as a quality, competence, and a state of the subject (i.e., of a receiver or an appreciator of objects). In their treatises, beauty was approached through the experience of it and by emphasizing the receiver's response. Thus, the focus of the theoretical discussions on beauty shifted from recognition of the rules of beauty in objects or intangible phenomena to investigation of the reception and impact of beauty.⁹ At the same time, the discussions on beauty were generally limited to perceptible reality, excluding attempts to recognize beauty outside the sensory world.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is perhaps the most influential theorist on beauty. His ideas on aesthetic experience, disinterested reception, purposelessness, purity, *a priori* knowledge, universality, sublimity, absolute beauty, etc., have been discussed, applied, and criticized in numerous studies since the publication of his

major work on aesthetic judgment, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*,¹⁰ in 1790. How useful are Kant's views for contemporary discussion on beauty?

The book at hand investigates the idea of beauty by focusing on its essence and exploring its ontological and epistemological terms of existence. The book aims to provide an understanding of the paradoxes in the conceptions of beauty – its simultaneous historical and timeless nature, its relativist and universal characteristics, and its subjectivity and objectivity. Instead of exploring diverse empirical manifestations of beauty in everyday life or in contemporary culture, the book takes a more philosophical and theoretical point of view on beauty and approaches the idea of it on a conceptual level. The following core questions penetrate the conceptual discussions in the book: What is the essence of beauty? How do the notions of beauty transform? Where is beauty *located*? Is it a cultural construction, a cognitive process in the human mind, a need, a value, a particular experience, a philosophy, etc.? The Kantian ideas and conceptions of beauty serve as a fruitful point of departure for the book. However, these ideas are discussed in the book in unconventional contexts and elaborated on also in critical terms.

Interdisciplinary dialog is needed to understand the world and its phenomena in depth and to produce new insights into their complexity. The interdisciplinary discussions in the book bring to the fore topics and views in which classical aesthetics faces the theories and ideas of other scholarly traditions. Bringing together different modes of perceiving, grasping, and explaining phenomena enables fruitful interaction of different disciplines and their specific knowledge.

The book is composed of seven chapters which are organized into three thematic sections. The first section, 'Attempts to Understand Beauty', discusses the different modes of grasping the essence of beauty and making sense of aesthetics in relation to human experiences and needs. Tuuli Lähdesmäki's chapter is titled 'Universalist and Particularist Discourses on the Intersection of Reality, Truth and Beauty' and focuses on the transformation of the notions of beauty in the history of Western philosophy and the contrasting comprehension of beauty in different disciplines. As the chapter indicates, the notions of reality, truth, and beauty form an interdependent nexus of meanings which are made sense of in different cognitive frameworks. In the chapter these frameworks are called mathematical-logical and cultural-emblematic epistemes. Despite their differences, the epistemes share a common realm of interest: aesthetics.

In the mathematical-logical episteme, form, order, and mathematical laws are closely related to the idea of beauty. The episteme emphasizes the idea of beauty as a universal quality which is not dependent on the cultural, historical, or individual contexts of people. Laying emphasis on universalism, the episteme relates beauty to the laws of nature and the idea of truth. Within the cultural-emblematic episteme, the notion of beauty is understood as a culturally bound and discursive concept based on conventions and shared cultural and social habits produced in and learned through social and cultural reproduction. Beauty is perceived as a relational

quality dependent on the contexts and impacts objects and works of art produce. The episteme highlights the intuitive, emotional, and affective nature of receiving beauty. According to its views, not only the experience of beauty but also the perception as such is often understood as subjective, contextual, and culturally and socially relative. As Lähdesmäki notes, scholars, philosophers, and artists have also fruitfully sought to combine the views of these two epistemes in order to create interdisciplinary explanations of the world.

Ruth Lorand's chapter in the first section asks in its title: 'What Is Beauty and Why Do We Need It?' Lorand discusses Kant's idea of beauty as a source of pleasure detached from any interest, purpose, or pragmatic aspect. According to Kant, people enjoy beauty without having a need for it, and the beauty that people enjoy has nothing to do with their conceptions, expectations, and desires. Lorand criticizes this stand by arguing that the pleasure aroused by beauty – or any other kind of pleasure – always indicates the satisfaction of some need; disinterestedness in the concrete object itself does not entail that no need was met by the object's beauty. Lorand notes that there is an important difference between having an interest in an object as a means for achieving a goal and having a need that the object directly or indirectly satisfies.

To clarify the ambiguousness of the philosophical discussion on beauty, Lorand makes a distinction between *interests* and *needs* and suggests that beauty answers a need of a special kind which combines two conflicting needs: the need to order the world and understand objects, actions, and events in rational terms of laws, regularities, and means to ends; and the need to preserve and express the individuality and uniqueness that escapes general formulations of order and purposiveness. The efforts to satisfy this special kind of need create a new kind of order, which Lorand calls 'the order of individuality'. In this order the contradictions and paradoxes of beauty meet each other and merge. As Lorand describes it:

It is not merely sensual or spiritual; it is not merely a form or an idea. Beauty is made of the complex materials of human experience; it integrates the sensual and the conceptual, the rational and the emotional, the real and the imaginary, the good and the bad, the orderly and the chaotic, and creates thereby new, unpredictable orders.¹¹

The first section ends with Alberto José Viralhadas Ferreira's chapter titled 'From Object to Emotion: The Aesthetics of Human-Computer Interaction'. The interdisciplinary discussion in the chapter stems from the intersection of computer and behavioural sciences, design, semiotics, and cultural studies, while the topic of the chapter – human-computer interaction (HCI) – provides different points of view on the interplay between computers and their users. As Ferreira notes, the

studies on HCI often suggest aesthetics as one of the bridging factors between the design and usability of technological artefacts. In his chapter, Ferreira focuses on identifying and analysing the aesthetic principles embodied in human-computer interactions, as well as their cultural and psychological emanations that shape interaction with and dependence on technologies.

The contemporary world is increasingly determined by a continuous flow of information and emotional and sensory impulses as the aesthetic experience offered by computer interaction progressively encroaches on everyday life. Ferreira emphasizes how experiences on, thoughts of, engagement with, and points of view on technology depend on the contexts of its use, such as the specificity of human-computer interaction, the particularity of the modes of interpretation, and culture as a specific socially enforced system of signs and meanings. In general, artefact design is reliant on cultural assumptions. Similarly, metaphors, aesthetic choices, imagery, and information structure have an impact on the reception and interpretation of a technologically mediated interface. Ferreira sees that semiotics provides a fruitful framework for investigating the role of culture in user interface design.

The second section of the book is titled ‘Metaphysics of Beauty’ and offers various perspectives for making sense of beauty. The three chapters in the section discuss beauty in relation to artistic expression, spirituality, and space. All the chapters include a historical point of view on beauty by explaining changes in its notions in regard to time and cultural and social changes. At the same time, the chapters bring to the fore the unchangeable essence of beauty. In the chapter titled ‘Bonds: A Brief Theorization about Beauty, Art and Literature from the Middle Ages to William Hogarth’s Age’, Rosina Martucci discusses transformations in the notion of beauty and their manifestations in art and literature in European history from the Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century. Her discussion draws together well-known artists and authors, such as Giovanni Boccaccio, William Shakespeare, and William Hogarth, by exploring the confluences of their works and the influences carried over from one stylistic period to another.

By exploring recurring topics in works of art, Martucci seeks to understand the historical contexts in which the artists and authors of the past centuries have discussed the idea of beauty and illustrated it in their works. One of these topics is the garden, which has cultural historical significance and which recurs as a subject and a scene in works of art such as *Decameron* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Italian Renaissance gardens emerged in the late 15th century and were inspired by classical ideas of order and beauty. They were intended for pleasure and enjoyment but also for contemplation. In addition to having an aesthetic function, gardens manifested the power and glory of their owners.

Martucci ends her chapter by exploring a less-referred-to treatise on beauty: William Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty*, published in 1753. Martucci describes it both as a moral work and as an aesthetic treatise combining theory with practical

advice on painting. In the treatise, Hogarth contradicted the classical belief that beauty was to be found in order and symmetry. According to him, the serpentine line – ‘the line of beauty’–brings out the ideal from which all beauty is derived. In addition, Hogarth divided the principles of elegance and beauty into six elements: fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity, all of which cooperate in the production of beauty. As he claims: ‘Thus Beauty is determined by multiple criteria reconciled and embodied in an organic whole.’¹² Hogarth, a painter, engraver, and satirist, illustrated in his art works and theorized in his treatise a notion of beauty which was in contrast with the aristocratic discussions on beauty of his time, as Martucci notes.

In her chapter titled ‘Sword and Shield: Absolute Beauty as a Wellspring of Infallibility’, Beverly R. Sherringham discusses the idea of Absolute Beauty – ‘beauty that supersedes standardized preconceptions of beauty with an indelible link to the Creator’.¹³ Sherringham uses David Hume’s views on the perceptions of beauty as a starting point for her discussion. According to Hume, perceptions of beauty are determined by sentiment; since sentiments are *felt* by persons, judgment of beauty is infallible.¹⁴ James Kirwan has further explicated Hume’s views by suggesting that perceptions of beauty are infallible in invoking a divine presence which empowers the observer with the ability to access the absolute.¹⁵ Sherringham continues her exploration of Absolute Beauty by including in the discussion the ideas of Mary Carruthers. According to Carruthers, human beings know through their senses and thus ‘divine communications must be fitted to human minds in order to be understood and experienced’.¹⁶ Works of art and other artefacts may function as agents of emotions and sensations; they do not just simulate or represent human feelings but produce them in those who are experiencing the work.¹⁷

Sherringham notes that the divine dimension of beauty cannot be analysed through Kantian knowledge or explained through logic. The understanding of Absolute Beauty is personal and cannot be accessed unless one is initiated to perceive and understand the dialog of physical beauty and its relationship with the divine. Understanding of Absolute Beauty is thus a question of faith, as Sherringham puts it. She describes the power and timelessness of Absolute Beauty produced by works of art as follows:

Through divine providence, the work becomes accessible to multitudinous interpretations, which are ever-evolving, though the essential message remains the same. As time progresses and society changes, the divine communication establishes itself in a manner which corresponds to the needs of the day, as it were.¹⁸

The last chapter of the second section broadens the discussion on beauty outside the Western context. In the chapter titled ‘Productive Nothingness’,

Harpreet (Neena) Mand and Marly Swanson Wood explore Japanese aesthetics and its differences from Western philosophical thinking. Mand and Swanson Wood contextualize their topic by discussing the historical transformation of Japan after the Meiji Restoration, which speeded the westernization of the newly formed nation state. The westernization and the interest of the West in Japanese culture influenced the aesthetic vocabulary of Japanese academics. The *external gaze* of the West was responded to by communicating local aesthetics for Western consumption and attempting to construct a Japanese national cultural identity on equal footing with the West. The aesthetic dialog in the modern era in Japan was challenged by the inherent juxtapositions created when Eastern ideals were rationalized through a Western hermeneutic tenet.

As Mand and Swanson Wood emphasize in their chapter, conceptualization of traditional Japanese aesthetics includes various terms which are difficult to translate. The ‘nameless and formless reality’ which extends beyond Western boundaries of conceptualization but underlies Japanese philosophical thinking and artistic creation is referred to in Japan as *sunyata*. This idea of a particular kind of emptiness is embodied in the Japanese religio-aesthetic paradigm of *Ma* that governs artistic practice. *Ma* describes an interval between two or more spatial or temporal things or events, thus referring to nothingness, void, and the space-time interval. According to Mand and Swanson Wood, coincidental conceptualization of time and space is perhaps the most important element that distinguishes Japan’s artistic expression from that of the West.

Mand and Swanson Wood direct their empirical focus on Japanese architect and historian Arata Isozaki (b. 1931) and his re-adoption of the concept of *Ma* at the end of the 1970s. Isozaki has intentionally illuminated the divide between Eastern and Western concepts of space and time; for him space and time are not *a priori* for every being, as he has emphasized they are for Kant. According to Mand and Swanson Wood, Isozaki’s emphasis on *Ma* can be interpreted as a desire to return to pre-modern Japanese aesthetic theories which form the basis for traditional Japanese culture and cultural understanding.

The third section of the book is titled ‘Experiencing Beauty in Space’. In it the authors explore beauty in the spatial experience of architecture. As the chapters in the section indicate, the boundary between built and natural environments and the outside and inside of an architectural space is fluid. The experience of spatial beauty is a profoundly complex cognitive and neuro-physiological process. The section starts with a chapter titled ‘The Khuner Haus by Adolf Loos: A Critical Study of Beauty’ by Anna Marie Fisker, Marie Frier Hvejsel and Hans Ramsgaard Møller. The authors focus on Austrian architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933) and his work, the Khuner Haus, a countryside cottage located in the austere Austrian Alpine landscape. What is the relationship between beauty and nature in experiencing the Khuner Haus? The authors seek to answer the question by exploring Loos’s writings on architecture and beauty and by traveling to the

Khuner Haus to make empirical observations and sense its spatiality, materiality, and relationship to its environment *in situ*.

Adolf Loos is often regarded as one of the pioneers of the modern movement in architecture, although his reputation in the movement is based on a few works and a body of controversial essays, as Fisker, Frier Hvejsel, and Ramsgaard Møller note. The idea and ideal of truthfulness had a central position in Loos's work. According to him, architects have to be true to the materials and functions of architecture. The ideas of beauty, truth, and modernity intertwine in Loos's work. As the authors state, in the Khuner Haus Loos inlays a narrative of beauty and truth by combining new technology with the use of local materials and traditional craftsmanship. But on what is the experience of beauty in an architectural space based? Would the Kantian notion of disinterestedness in human needs and values explain the pleasure created by beautiful architecture? Fisker, Frier Hvejsel, and Ramsgaard Møller come to the conclusion that beauty is a source of pleasure because it is not detached from human needs and values. On the contrary, beauty corresponds to human needs. According to the writers, Loos's architecture is a creation of beauty that one feels and desires to explore. His architecture and thinking manifest 'a beauty in spite of nature' and its opposition, 'a beauty within nature', as the authors express it.¹⁹

The book ends with Boussora Kenza's chapter titled 'The Complex Experience of Beauty: Architecture, Man and Building Environment' in which she discusses the appraisal of beauty with architecture as an example. Compared with other works of art, the perception of architecture includes particular complexity. Architectural spaces have an outside and an inside, and the surrounding environment of architectural spaces – other buildings, streets, natural elements, etc. – have an impact on the perception of architecture. The experience of beauty in architecture is determined not only by the form of the building, but also by the way the surrounding external space is structured. This structure is determined by philosophical concepts and cultural meaning-making, as Kenza points out.

Kenza indicates in her chapter that appraisal of beauty in architecture is a holistic process: man's personality, individual interests, emotional state, memories, needs, and values influence this appraisal. Appraisal of beauty involves both the mind and the body, as different senses are needed to experience space. Architecture is thus experienced dynamically and synesthetically; through different sensations involving, e.g., movement, light, temperature, sound, smell, touch, etc. In this dynamic process all visual, acoustical, olfactory, tactile, and kinesthetic features of an architectural space influence the human experience. Kenza goes even further in her exploration of the appraisal of beauty in architecture. She brings to the discussion studies according to which the ability to experience aesthetic pleasure is genetic and has a neuro-physiological basis encoded in the human brain. In neuro-scientific and neuro-psychological studies, the experience of beauty is explained as a neural mechanism.

As the presentation of the chapters illustrates, the discussion on beauty in the book proceeds from mathematical and philosophical discourses of beauty to aesthetics in human-computer interactions, from artistic expression to the divine dimension of Absolute Beauty, from spatial and temporal conceptualization of beauty to its spatial experience, and ends with a discussion on appraisal of beauty as a complex chain of events in the human mind and a synesthetic bodily process. Although the book offers manifold perspectives on the idea of beauty, beauty's deepest nature still remains hidden. Beauty avoids any final determination. It can be, thus, considered a mystery.

The chapters are based on conference papers presented at the '3rd Global Conference: Beauty; Exploring Critical Issues' held from the 13th to the 15th of September, 2013, in Harris Manchester College at the University of Oxford. The conference gathered together scholars from diverse disciplines and practitioners with differing professional backgrounds and contexts. As the conference demonstrated, beauty is a complex concept intertwined with the identification and subjectivity of people (such as notions on gender, race, sexuality, etc.) and various domains of their everyday life (such as education, fashion, entertainment, etc.). In addition to empirical investigations of beauty and the problems in its contemporary manifestations, the conference sought to tackle the problem of beauty in more philosophical and conceptual terms and discuss what beauty exactly is. This book illustrates some of these attempts.

The conference series on beauty has been organized by Inter-Disciplinary.Net with Professor Jacque Lynn Foltyn from the National University, USA, as the head of the conference. I want to thank Professor Foltyn for her work on the conference, Director of Publishing Lisa Howard from the Inter-Disciplinary Press for her work during the publication process, PhD Beverly R. Sherringham for her cooperation as the co-editor of the book, and all the authors of the book for providing in their chapters interesting interdisciplinary discussions on beauty.

Notes

¹ Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1923).

² Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2002).

³ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31.2 (1972): 165–180.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

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- ⁵ Umberto Eco, 'Kauneus sopusuhtaisuutena ja harmoniana,' *Kauneuden historia*, eds. Girolamo De Michele and Umberto Eco, trans. Pekka Tuomisto (Helsinki: WSOY, 2008), 61–97.
- ⁶ Tatarkiewicz, 'The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,' 167–169.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Margaret C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210a–212c.
- ⁹ Umberto Eco, 'Ylevyys,' *Kauneuden historia*, eds. Girolamo De Michele and Umberto Eco, trans. Pekka Tuomisto (Helsinki: WSOY, 2008), 275.
- ¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
- ¹¹ Ruth Lorand, 'What Is Beauty and Why Do We Need It?' in this volume.
- ¹² William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: Variety, 1753), 5.
- ¹³ Beverly R. Sherringham, 'Sword and Shield: Absolute Beauty as a Wellspring of Infallibility,' in this volume.
- ¹⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 144; see also James Kirwan, *Beauty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.
- ¹⁵ Kirwan, *Beauty*, 5.
- ¹⁶ Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ¹⁸ Sherringham, 'Sword and Shield: Absolute Beauty as a Wellspring of Infallibility.'
- ¹⁹ Anna Marie Fisker, Marie Frier Hvejsel, and Hans Ramsgaard Møller, 'The Khuner Haus by Adolf Loos – A Critical Study of Beauty,' in this volume.

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