

“BETWEEN MYTH AND GENIUS”: THE VERY PLACE OF AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT. The present paper does not propose that we should look at the field of aesthetics from the perspective of concepts such as artistic taste, artistic value, or the ethical implications of art. These are issues that could be the subject of future investigation in this area, especially in connection with debates surrounding the instrumental value of art. Furthermore, this paper does not seek to define or develop what otherwise are necessary efforts of dealing with the convoluted syntagm *ars gratia artis*, which is sometimes being used to shield artists and their work from gritty scrutiny of the intrinsic nature of art and its lack of immediate, realistic connotations for the general public. What this paper proposes instead is a survey of the evolution of perceptions of art during ancient and Renaissance times, in the hope that it will help to facilitate a more straightforward navigation of the conundrum of designations and views associated with the idea of beauty and nature in art.

KEY WORDS: beauty, mimetism, art, Antiquity, Renaissance

Introduction. The “Margins” of Aesthetics

As a typical definition, aesthetics is considered a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of beauty, art, artistic taste, creation and the idea of beauty in relation with nature. In short, it is viewed as a critical reflection on art, culture and nature.

However, Theodor Adorno in his *Ästhetische Theorie* from 1970 (*Aesthetic Theory*, in its 1977 English translation) surprised with an austere and completely schismatic definition of aesthetics compared to theorizations already offered by other previous schools of thought. Published posthumously, but finding a precedent in his magnum opus *Negative Dialektik*, *Aesthetic Theory* announces from the outset that aesthetics should not be identified primarily

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with the concept of beauty, whose meanings do not do justice to the “entire content of aesthetics”:

If aesthetics were nothing more than a systematic catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty. In terms of the intention of aesthetic reflection, the concept of beauty is but one element. The idea of beauty draws attention to something essential in art, without, however, articulating it directly. If artifacts were not in various ways judged to be beautiful, the interest in them would be incomprehensible and blind, and no one - neither artist nor beholder - would have reason to make that Exodus from the sphere of practical aims, thise of self-preservation and pleasure, that art requires by virtue of its consitution... The history of the Hellenic spirit discerned by Nietzsche is unforgettable because it followed through and presented the historical process between myth and genius. The archaic giants reclining in one of the temples of Agrigento are no more rudiments Than are the demins of Attic drama. Form requires them if it is not to capitulate to myth, which persists in it so long as form merely rejects it. (Adorno 1977: 51)

And Adorno goes on showing that “in all subsequent art of any import [music, sculpture, painting, n.n.] this counterelement to beauty is maintained and transformed” (Adorno 1970: 52), and where it transforms, it no longer contains the features of beauty (see, for instance, Euripides’ tragedies), but of the opposite of beauty: even the gods of Olympus have demons as opponents, and the demons’ feature is not dignity, but violence. This dialectic of art’s identity, the fact that art must at any point stand in contrast to what is percieved to be its objective form, is precisely what drives art between myth (its atemporal essence) and genius (art’s continual quest for innovation, see Adorno 1977: 169).

And yet, historically, aesthetics came to be perceived in the Age of Enlightenment as a separate sphere from philosophy, due to the development of theories about art that brought together sculpture, poetry, painting, music and dance, saying that they had the same origin; as such, they were reunited under the common name les beaux arts. Containing all the idea of beauty, Baumgarten generally called them “aesthetics” in *Reflections on Poetry* (1735). Baumgarten (2022) showed that the term aesthetics designates one of the two branches of knowledge, in addition to reason. Aesthetics became the branch of knowledge studied through sensory experience, through senses and feeling, which for him ensured a distinct type of knowledge from what the abstract ideas studied by logic offer us. The senses, therefore, are the ones that render

the notion and idea of beauty when they recognize it in nature or in oneself, so beauty appears in any context in which the senses seek and find excellence: the visual, plastic and decorative arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, ceramics, tapestry, photography, design, decoupage, assemblage, calligraphy and literature, which, although it uses intuition, needs an external form – the word – to reach expressiveness). In other words, as a conclusion to Adorno's take on the transformation that occurs in the art-nature relationship, "mimesis transformed by art, perhaps even into a version of its opposite, might [...] constitute what Adorno calls 'fulfillment of objectivity'" (Huhn 2004: 11).

And yet, the aspects that aesthetics formulated as the art of beauty imply have raised several problems and questions from Antiquity to the present day:

-when we aesthetically evaluate an object or work of art, must we take into account certain impressions/must we have a certain aesthetic attitude through which one views art and its natural environment?

-is aesthetic experience needed to realize the beauty of a work?

-does the work of art have an intrinsic aesthetic value, just like moral and religious values?

If we claim that aesthetics is a separate and independent category of philosophy, which can explain its terms exclusively on the basis of the senses, on the basis of what is clear, at hand, mediated by the natural senses, then these questions will not be able to receive an answer in relation to the philosophy of art, which studies problems such as the nature of beauty and artistic taste. How else will we be able to solve problems such as the difference between the numerous art pieces (paintings, sculptures), songs, literary creations that seem less valuable than others or even fail to present any kind of artistic value. Moreover, if aesthetics must define beauty as having value for itself and through itself (*ars gratia artis*), then clearly some arts (architecture, ceramics, design, tapestry, etc.) cannot be defined as art, because their function is no longer exclusively related to the sensation of beauty, but instead elapses into the sphere of practicality, since their main purpose is to serve people on account of their utilitarianism.

Moreover, it is said that even the novel as a literary species is not aesthetic and disinterested, because it is not clothed in a sensitive medium. Metal objects, to be sure, could hardly be considered beautiful, as their material is too crude and impersonal. Other creations, such as modern sculpture, use ignoble material, mud even, from which it is impossible to come up with something noble (marble is rare and noble, thus by extension ancient and Renais-

sance works had a higher value than current ones?). Such creations would at most combine the useful with the pleasant, but would not produce exclusively pleasure (feelings, sensations), without mundane interests. If the value of the work does not depend only on itself, on the impression it creates for us and on the power to elevate us, but is also utilitarian, can it still be considered art?

These questions have to do with the different attempts to theorize the artistic phenomenon present in different historical and cultural periods. If Plato and Aristotle, just like their predecessors, emphasized the craft (*technē*), the character of the master revealed in the work (*poiesis*) and the relationship between the work and nature (*mimesis*), accents resumed and reinvigorated by the Renaissance, the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment laid down before our eyes a dialectic of the means and environment of the work: it no longer comes through the mediation of reason, but of the senses. These differences merely opened ever new questions: how should art be interpreted, through the lenses of the craft (*technē*)/capabilities (*poiesis*) of the artist, or by the way in which they render the art-nature correspondence?

Thus, what does one base the aesthetic attitude on? Up to the Enlightenment, the attitude towards beauty was understood, at times, as disinterested engagement (in that the experience we have with the work should not be touched by utilitarianist drives); distancing from personal needs/cares; and contemplation of the object simply for the sensation it creates in and of itself, without being affected by the knowledge I may have about the object.

The truth is perhaps somewhere in the middle, for there cannot be sensory experiences in a pure state, a work created only through the senses, without a certain experience/knowledge of it. In the absence of certain *a-priori* concepts, we cannot explain the essence or reality of the work of art, thus important questions arise as to whether aesthetics can really be seen as a sphere separate from the field of philosophy.

Ancient Aesthetics from Impersonators to Creators

Plato's insistence on reason, and not on feeling, on mathematical truth, not on that of human emotion, comes from his conviction that reality is based on eternal and immutable forms, and not on the material and chaotic existence of people. In the ideal world, says Plato, things exist in perfect form, not being copies, but original forms. This world of forms (truth, essence, ideal) can only be understood through reason and logical argument. Since nature is only a copy, any form of art that reproduces nature is only copying a copy, and is therefore doubly imperfect/inferior.

Plato feared that art and artists could impede social order because they would distract loyal citizens from the pursuit of eternal values/truth, which is the only uncompromising source of goodness/altruism. In the *Republic* (2007: II, III), Plato refers expressly to poets and poetry when he warns that all poetic imitations are deficient for the understanding of the listeners, unless as an antidote they possess knowledge of the true nature of the originals.

Although in other writings (where, for instance, he discusses the nature of inspiration by distinguishing between “ordinary madness” and the threefold manifestations of “divine madness”, see *Phaedrus* 237a7-b1 in Plato 1972), Plato tries to save poetry by urging poets to write about the lives of prominent dignitaries, so that listeners can take up their example of virtue, in the *Republic* he shows that the existence of poets is dangerous for his ideal society, because their art tells lies and encourages irrational behavior. It could be inferred that Plato initiates a theory that takes into account the effect of literature on the reader in, a so to speak, moralizing/didactic/educational criticism. Moral criticism refers only to the content of a literary work, to its positive or harmful effect, and not to its formal or artistic value. Plato also establishes several premises for literary theory, which even challenge today’s structuralist and poststructuralist literary critics, namely that:

- the material world is not real, but only an imperfect copy of the ideal world;
- art represents/reproduces only the perceptible material world;
- beauty, justice and goodness can only be understood through the prism of the truth of the world/ideal form;
- the world is structured binary: rational-irrational; good-bad; man-woman; public-private;
- literature, although important, must be supervised, because it has a strong effect on readers;
- the content of literature (what it says and represents) is more important than its form.

Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle starts from the idea that art is not necessarily a reproduction/imitation of nature, therefore of the world that we experience through the senses, so it is not necessarily an imperfect copy of nature. Art is rather a process by which we place events from nature in a medium (such as words, paint, wood or stone) that perfects or completes nature. Art does not tell lies, but reveals truths in a way other than through rational/logical deduction.

For Aristotle, art is not in binary opposition to reason, so it is not an impediment or a threat to logic or reason; the pleasure that comes from representation/*mimesis* proposes a different kind of truth, not a falsehood that endangers society, because it is driven by practical thought or *technē* (Aristotle 1999: 1139a5-15) which “governs productive action (*poiētikē*)”. This is because reality, says Aristotle, is not an eternal static world of perfect ideal forms, compared to which the material world would appear only as a bland imitation. Reality, says Aristotle, is a world of appearances and perceptions in constant change, the ordinary world of things and events that we experience daily. In the midst of these changing realities, form appears only in concrete circumstances.

If for Plato an apple/a chair were simple imitations, inferior copies of the ideal form of a chair/apple that cannot be accessed through the senses, but only deduced through logical processes, for Aristotle, on the contrary, the only way we can know the essence/substance of the chair/apple is through the individual appearances of the chairs/apples. Form, Aristotle shows, exists only through some concrete examples of it, not through eternal ideal abstractions. In the world that we understand through the senses, the existence of things is based on orderly principles that can be discovered, so that truth comes to us through the discovery of the laws and principles that dictate how things in the material world function and receive meaning.

Aristotle’s thought/philosophy first lays the philosophical foundations of science, because he observes specific phenomena (for example, the way someone sits in a particular chair), and then makes deductions, based on these observations, regarding the laws that dictate the functioning of chairs (see the principle that all chairs must be provided with a seat support). Science, according to Aristotle, catalogs and classifies things in the material world by discovering similarities and differences in their form and by deducing general principles of organization and taxonomy of these forms, rather than individual particularities.

In this vein, for Aristotle, poetry and all other forms of art function according to the rules of biology as science: he wants to identify the characteristics of different forms of poetry and then develop systematic categories for classifying these forms. If Plato evaluated through moral criticism what art/poetry does with/for the audience, Aristotle in his *Poetics* laid the foundations of genre criticism by investigating what poetry is, not what poetry does, and so examined literature according to its internal structure. Thus, when referring to drama, Aristotle sought to determine the formal characteristics of comedy and tragedy.

Comedy, he says, is addressed to ordinary people, the peasants and the common man, while tragedy is addressed to the nobility. The center of Aristotelian aesthetics is occupied by the concept of mimesis, which for him involves the fields of poetry, painting (visual arts) and music. The concept of mimesis defines for Greek philosophers the relationship between works of art and the world (nature, in the later Enlightenment tradition). The original meanings of the word *mimesis* are discussed at length, but the discussions mainly focus on two meanings that, it seems, were also accessible to Plato and Aristotle (since they use the word as if the audience had long known what they were talking about): *memimemenon* (an ancient Egyptian custom of carrying the effigy of a corpse to banquets to plastically highlight the extremely realistic bodily valences of the model that must not be forgotten – *memento mori* – but rendered in art in the same way) and *mimeisthai* (Greek, “to follow, to immitate”), a verb that refers to the reproduction/copying of reality/appearance.

Nonetheless, Plato does not encourage *mimesis* as an effort to represent in fact or in reality a certain entity/truth, because the (physical) form is in tense relations with the Ideal/true reality (spiritual – rational). Rather, Plato (see the dialogue *Ion*) proposes to understand mimesis as imitation-copy, with reference to the correspondence between sign and meaning (e.g. Herodotus, in his *Histories*, made the analogy/correspondence/similarity between the ancient ornamented colonnades and palm leaves, saying that the said colonnades resemble palm trees, and not that they are palm trees, because colonnades cannot represent/signify anything). Just as the art of ornamental colonnades presupposes some “craft” (*technē, technai*) or experience, so the art of writing, painting, sculpting is based on experience and is a proof of the artist’s craft or skill (see Aristotle 1999: VI).

Aristotle somewhat takes over the sense of *mimesis* from Plato, with an important difference, however. Plato does not give any importance to creativity or artistic inventiveness, and the aesthetic act had to be based on experience and pre-existing principles, on something that already exists in nature or outside it (the gods). In fact, Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (1961: I-IX, X-XIV) and in also his *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Aristotle 1999) keeps the *a priori* argument, according to which the craft (which is rational, as in Plato) is a source or aesthetic process involving *epistēmē* or knowledge, since it is a practice that requires theoretical understanding as well. However, Aristotle tries to complete a combination between: the artist’s ability or skill to create the work of art (called *poiesis*), the development of genres or literary tradition in which that work appeared, and the relationship between the work of art and reality

or nature (called *mimesis*). In this relationship, the artist's inventiveness or creativity receives some credit, but only along the lines of the artist's nature (which may be inclined towards serious or humorous works) and the seriousness with which he approaches art.

An example given by Aristotle in this sense is the Homeric epic, where the poet's inspiration in creating the work of art (*poiesis*) depends on the extent to which the poet uses his skills or his knowledge (*technē*) in the field and on his innate qualities (*phusis*), including intelligence. Therefore, in Aristotle the sources of aesthetics (*poiesis*) are three (skill/*technē*, genre tradition and internal and external nature: *phusis* and *mimesis*), while in Plato there were at best two: *technē* and *mimesis*, the inspiration or creativity being likened to the madness by which some people differ from others who do not stand out.

Renaissance Aesthetics and Its Incentives

The Renaissance covered through its wide influence, the 14th-17th centuries in Italy, the 16th century in France, Germany and the Low Countries (Holland, Flanders-Belgium) and the 17th century in England and Spain. According to the name, the Renaissance meant broadly a revival of the interest in man and his inner rational universe, but also in the arts, in contrast to the Middle Ages, considered by the then people to have been traditionalist, dogmatic and fanatical, so the Renaissance itself would be modernist in comparison to it. And so it was, all the more so in the literature of renown representative writers of Renaissance humanism, such as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), François Rabelais (1494-1553), Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), Lope de Vega (1526-1635), Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681). That being said, the innermost aspects of these writers' works and the peculiarities of Renaissance art, even those expressed by late-Renaissance mannerism (see Murray and Murray 1963: 148), are not what we are envisaging here. On the contrary, the preliminaries that defined art at its highest concern us more, since they show this period to be above all dominated by the impetus to acquire knowledge rather than to expand the realm of the senses.

As expected, the Renaissance of culture, arts and sciences needed preliminary conditions for its emergence, namely several economic and socio-political necessities that would ensure a favorable environment for its development. With the emergence of the middle class (*bourgeoisie*) in Italy, as opposed to medieval feudalism, this country was the first in which the signs of a new

ideological wave oriented towards man appeared. Humanism is, in fact, a synonymous term for the Renaissance, having two main connotations, of which the first, more broad and encompassing, is defined as love for people, while the second, narrow and chronological, as interest in the past values of Antiquity. Because the Middle Ages had approached Antiquity in a truncated and restrictive way through the prism of Catholic dogmas, the Renaissance makes Antiquity a model of creation and inspiration in all forms of art (architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, philosophy, theology), but the Renaissance did not manifest itself only in the artistic sense, but was an intellectual movement.

From its inception, the Italian Renaissance showed several features considered of the utmost importance, such as:

1. the supporting of trade, which implied free movement between the Italian city-states, and the development of crafts;
2. the great geographical discoveries/expeditions (Marco Polo in China, Christopher Columbus in the Americas, alongside Spanish navigators, etc.), thus expanding the known geographical space compared to that of the Middle Ages;
3. the invention of the printing press in Gutenberg, Germany in cca. 1440, with consequences throughout Europe at that time, allowing for the rapid multiplication and circulation of scientific and literary productions at minimal costs;
4. the discovery of ancient manuscripts in Classical Greek and Latin, documents that were carefully studied and indeed revived the long lost passion for these languages and for the cultural fields that they impacted. Literary, philosophical, and theological texts began to be looked upon in a new light (see Marsilio Ficino's translation of Plato from Greek into Latin), more critical and using a more precise terminology, faithful to the originals, that is, a result of which being that the trust in the apocrypha was greatly suppressed;
5. the development of archaeology with the financial support of patrons, unearthing walls, statues, and lost treasures of the Antiquity (see Cosimo de' Medici in Florence, who supported sculptors, painters and architects such as Raphael, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Perugino, Bellini, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.);
6. the emergence of great libraries museums, and new style palaces (the Uffizzi Galleries, Palazzo Medici-Ricardi, Palazzina di Belvedere, Palazzo Strozzi, Giardino di Boboli in Florence, etc.), bookstores for public use, cathedrals endowed with sculptures and paintings by famous artists of the

time, and also academies in the ancient style, all of which made Renaissance seem like a realm of “humanism, magic, and science” (see Grafton in Goodman and MacKay 1990: 117);

7. the conquest of Greek Byzantium/Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, a turning point for the Greek population in the area, was followed by the exile of the elevated Greeks who took refuge from Islam in Italy and especially in Florence and Venice; they brought with them the knowledge of ancient and Koine/Hellenistic Greek as reflected in the reacquired manuscripts, a language whose particularities had long been forgotten by the Western World. The newly arrived Greeks who were employed in the Italian universities (for instance Manuel Chrysoloras and G. Gemisthus Pletho) helped make Classicism flourish and rekindled the interest in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, thus making their time a reactionary one in comparison with the previous historical/ecclesiastical conformism (see Loomis 1908: 251-252);
8. the appearance of utopian writings throughout European literature (*utopia*, from the Greek οὐ τόπος/ou topos/“no place”, or “perfect/ideal place/island), a place free from vain teachings, which, precisely because it could not be specifically localized, had a universal character. Utopias became popular also as a result of new geographical discoveries and social realities, such as the Turkish invasion, the exile of Greek-rite Christians into Western cities, the new biblical texts hermeneutics, the rationalist model in social organization (see such works written by the great humanists and theologians of the time, like Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* from 1516, or the empiricist philosopher Sir Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* from 1626);
9. the writing of treatises of social and court morals with portraits of the ideal king, such as *Il Principe/The Prince* (1513/1532) by Niccolò Machiavelli (1464-1527) from Florence, a cornerstone of the Renaissance, wherein politics becomes an objective science by promoting centralized power and consolidated authority (an idea especially manifested in the execution of Girolamo Savonarola and the reinstatement of de Medici family in Florence). According to *The Prince* (1998: 21, 45) the ideal leader or “principal-ity” (be it secular or ecclesiastical) could resort, if necessary, to less orthodox tactics in Order to ensure the well-being of his citizens. To be sure, this is the political and social realm in which Renaissance aesthetics thrived in the midst of power, money, privilege, and innovation, and in which, along with social crisis and political tyranny, a new idea of art imbued with the cult of form, thus objectified, emerged in the republic (see Baron 1996).

Through all these peculiarities, the Renaissance returned to Protagoras' ancient motto "man as measure of all things" (in Diels and Krantz 1968; and Plato 1996) and the greatest wonder of the world (see Sophocles in *Antigone*), aiming to reach the ideal of the universal man in the sense of belonging to a unified world/continent/Europe as a spiritual and cultural space. The multi-faceted or polymath man of the Renaissance was an individual harmoniously developed as a physical being, intellectually cultivated, and also appreciating beauty and action in the footsteps of François Rabelais (for whom man was an "abyss of science", who learns both classical humanities and geometry and physics) and Picco della Mirandola, who upheld scientific truth as a return to Platonism (see Blum 2014: 26). On the same note, in his famous essay *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Mirandola declared that he was the fiercest follower of Italian humanism, maintaining that in the created Order, man should not be "content with a lower place [than seraphim and cherubim], imitate them in their Glory and dignity. If we choose to, we will not be second to them in anything" (Mirandola, *Oration*, 4).

Starting with painting and continuing with literature, the Renaissance man is recommended, as an aesthetic attitude, to "carefully study the great model of nature" based on a scientific knowledge of it. Such model was Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian man", a sketch based on his experience following a series of medical experiments on cadavers, because of which he was banned from Florence and thus from under the protective wing of Cosimo de' Medici by representatives of the Catholic Church. The portrait technique, the refined details of faces and forms, and also the Renaissance inventions and the artistic sketches remained models throughout history up until the Modern art at the end of the 19th century. But as it happens, the nature that Renaissance artists emulated was similar to the political *status quo*, at times fantastic and grotesque, in staunch defiance of the "ideal", fixed world of Plato, an aspect easily grasped in both paintings and literary works. Renaissance aesthetics at the end of this artistic movement was increasingly mannerist, and in the end exaggerations such as those in Parmigianino's portraits, Rabelais' characters or the novels' picaresque materialized naturally, just like the harmonious bodies before them (Lopez 1970; Haughton 2004: 229).

Conclusions

We have seen Plato introducing a new approach to art based on his take on the concept of *mimesis*, one that considers, for instance, the impact of literature on the reader from a moral and didactic perspective, showing that moral

criticism pertains only to the content of the work with its positive or negative impact, and not to its formal or artistic merit. Additionally, he posits several tenets regarding the nature of art, in the belief that the material world does not reflect the ideal world accurately. Thus, concepts such as beauty and goodness can only be fully grasped when looked at through the lenses of the truth of the ideal form. Since the world is structured in binary opposition, and since more often than not artists are prone to use imagination rather than reason in their pursuit of the work, they must be especially subject to scrutiny due to their appeal to the sense and thus their immediate influence on readers as fraudsters.

On the other hand, Aristotle art is far from standing in binary opposition to logic, and thus it is not a threat to it. More likely, the pleasure derived from representing reality/mimesis in art proposes a different kind of truth and it is driven by practical thought/*technē* which governs productive action/the work of art. In opposition to Plato's ideal, fixed world, Aristotle is adamant that reality is an world of ever-changing perceptions, comprising the ordinary world and people's daily experiences as well. Given these evolving realities, form manifests solely in the context of specific circumstances.

Supposedly, the Renaissance art was meant to be a return to these particular tenets on art and the artist. The rise of the middle class in Italy with its new social ideology, placed the individual at its core, hence the term humanism, which is often used as a synonym for the Renaissance, with two main connotations in its love for man and Antiquity. If the Middle Ages had approached Antiquity in a restrictive way, the Renaissance made the latter a model of creation and inspiration in all forms of art. However, given the materialistic whims and political emancipation of the Renaissance, its art was bound to immitate and serve the state propaganda of its financiers, and once more the emphasis was placed on the form in matters pertaining to sensibility and artistic creation.

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