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Beauty Trouble

Anne Elisabeth Sejten

Abstract: *By tracing the concept of beauty as an epistemic move toward sensibility and embodied experience, this article provides a survey in which beauty appears to have disturbed rather than stabilized the philosophical field of aesthetics. On the other hand, the enduring ability to disturb philosophical thought is exactly what testifies to beauty’s conceptually dynamic and vital role in aesthetics. The troubling consequences of the concept ‘beauty’ are discussed in five centennial tableaux that accentuate mutually conflictual aspects: sensitive beauty in the eighteenth century, idealistic beauty in the nineteenth century, sublime beauty in the twentieth century, and appearing beauty in the twenty-first century. This outline of changing conceptions of beauty throughout the history of aesthetic philosophy entails questions about the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic, as well as it addresses the relationship between art and nature in a new fashion.*

Keywords: *Sensible beauty, artistic beauty, the beautiful and the sublime, appearing beauty, art and nature.*

Beauty’s foundational role in aesthetics is irrefutable. The epistemological specificity that has allowed aesthetics to join philosophy in its own right has to do with the disunion of the alliance that, since antiquity, has linked beauty to morality and truth as inseparable pillars of true knowledge. From the canonization of the idealization of beauty in Plato’s era throughout medieval Christianity, beauty has indistinctly been embraced in sensitive and metaphysical splendor in various spiritualized forms. This metaphysical conceptualization remained largely unchallenged until the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment philosophers began splitting beauty from supra-sensitive transcendence.¹ In many essays, beauty was increasingly conceptualized in relation to the specific—and sensible—pleasure it occasions² before finally receiving its attribute of aesthetic in Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) and being incorporated by Kant as the beautiful in his transcendental philosophy in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

The purpose of this article is to revisit various key formulations that have orchestrated the ascension of beauty throughout modern thought not only to exemplify to the extent to which

1 The history of ideas unfolding around “the beautiful” is treated in numerous works, e.g., Ferry (2001), Lacoste (1986) and, most recently, Talon-Hugon (2004).

2 For example, in Dubos’ seminal *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1719) and Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725).

beauty has taken an active part in arguments for an autonomous field of philosophy—a genuinely aesthetic take on human experience—but also to witness how beauty acts as a subtle troublemaker. From the beginning of its epistemic turn toward sensibility, beauty seems to have disturbed rather than stabilized and weakened more than strengthened the newly gained autonomy of aesthetics it was supposed to secure. Nonetheless, the enduring ability to disturb philosophical thought is exactly what provokes the interest in beauty. Although beauty belongs to one of those *choses vagues* that qualify abstract ideas and emotional phenomena³, such dubious familiarity does not necessarily discredit beauty’s potential to embrace a dynamic concept in philosophy. The persistence of beauty is evidence to the contrary. Does not beauty possess an astonishing immunity that serenely overcomes the ever-failing attempts at conceiving a theory of beauty? Ideas of beauty continue inexorably to survive a destiny of being dragged through ordinary and poetic language that endows beauty with the ability to signify a thousand different things. However, the difficulty of grasping beauty philosophically may well reside in its popularity and extreme vivacity in ordinary life and the arts, combining all kinds of articulations from spontaneous exclamations, such as “How beautiful!” to the grandiloquent allegorical figure of Beauty in the fine arts. Likewise, the long-term absence, if not disesteem, that has fallen to beauty’s lot in modernist and contemporary aesthetics may have to do with the concept’s plasticity. If beauty is capable of hibernating in other concepts, especially those that sensuous experience brings together, such as emotions, feelings, affectivity, sensitiveness, and do on, beauty tends taciturnly to traverse them all in an englobing category.

Therefore, somaesthetics offers a powerful horizon of theorization that implicitly communicates with our investigation. Whether beauty is troubling because it is perceived as an obstacle to fulfilling aesthetic thought, or beauty is troubling because it claims to be genuine in aesthetic thought, the reasons converge in beauty’s inner connections to sensibility and to a somewhat secret body knowledge. Sensitive experience remains essential to beauty, which is the assumption that I would like to expand upon. In this context, somaesthetics evokes an obvious response because of the interest this research field has in the active and participating aspects of bodily perception. The guiding thread that links philosophical positions on beauty, which are presented below in four condensed centennial tableaus, is thus a discussion concerning the types of sensitiveness these approaches to beauty imply, regarding whether their trouble-making activity conveys the purpose of cultivating or abandoning beauty in aesthetics.

It goes without saying that, within the limits imposed by the scope of this article, the selection is extremely fragmentated and restricted to momentous sources of classical philosophy in the first place. Second, the selection is even more eclectic in its focus on the German philosopher Martin Seel, who provides an indicative voice of what might be seen as the scholarly return to beauty in contemporary aesthetics.

Eighteenth-century tableau: Diderot and the French Enlightenment

Denis Diderot, the author of the article “Beautiful” in the French *Encyclopedie* (1752), illustrates the ongoing reconstruction of the understanding of beauty during the eighteenth century in a highly significant way. Even before broaching the subject, he observes the convoluted nature of beauty. Paradoxically, he claims that the general use in ordinary language is exactly what makes beauty such a “difficult” concept:

³ The expression *choses vagues*, i.e., things misty, derives from Paul Valéry’s *La politique de l’esprit* (1941) and signifies things which escape definition and are thus loaded by spirit, and spirit *only*.

Before delving deeper into the difficult research that the origin of the beautiful is, I would first bring to the attention, with all the authors who wrote on the subject, that by a sort of fatality, the topics most addressed among men are rather ordinarily these least known to them; and that such is, among many others, the lot of the beautiful. (Diderot, 2006 [1752])

He then moves to a meticulous discussion of the erudite sources of beauty from antiquity to his own contemporaneity, touching on, among others, Saint Augustin's definition of beauty as "unity," Wolff's notion of the kind of "pleasure" that beauty occasions, Crouzac's emphasis on the "feeling" that arouses art, Hutcheson's discovery of an "internal sense," and Father André's distinction between essential and arbitrary beauties. However, in formulating his own position, Diderot, being highly skeptical about the positions he has just reviewed, laconically points to a criterion in a debate about music between Rameau and Rousseau, that is, "the perception of rapports." Still, what matters in the experience of beauty, as implied as the perception of rapports, is the preeminence of the senses. To affirm that something is beautiful is mediated less by the intellect than by the senses:

When I say, then, that a being is beautiful through the rapports that one notices in it, I do not refer to the intellectual or fictitious rapports that our imagination brings into the being, but I refer to the real rapports that are there, and that our understanding notices through the help of our senses. (Diderot, 2006 [1752])

The secular change in the understanding of beauty is sealed in the spontaneous expression by which Diderot pays tribute to the senses: "through the help of our senses." The beautiful is definitively no longer a property that exists only through reason but arises within the perceiving and sensing subject.

Sensible beauty, in fact, constitutes the groundbreaking outcome of the major epistemic transformations that came to affect the entire way of understanding the world in the transition between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Because of the major scientific advances that occurred, particularly in mechanical physics, the sensible achieved an autonomous position alongside the intelligible. Kant's transcendental criticism may be singled out as the accomplishment of the epistemological rehabilitation of the senses, as far as the senses constitutively contribute to the work of knowledge in constituting the world of phenomena.

Diderot's encyclopedia entry is interesting because it crosses the line insofar as he accompanies beauty in joining the field of "out there" in a general and everyday manner. Beauty then obviously migrates into the sensible world by Diderot's losing sight of the speculative wordings of the authors he consulted. Scarcely retaining any of the outlined theories, he nonetheless embraces their underlying assumption: beauty happens within a relationship between the subject and an object. Of course, we might still talk about the idea of beauty, but this idea is certainly not a faint echo of the Idea of Beauty. Beauty refers to the feeling occasioned by something that a subject has come across in the sensible world, or, as Diderot stated, "the real rapports that are there."

Emphasizing the pure, formal condition of the power that some things and beings have to affect us, Diderot appears to argue for a basic, but enlarged, understanding of beauty that is by no means restricted to the arts. Instead, he pays attention to the proportions at play within material tissues that stimulate the ability to perceive freely. Thus, receptiveness to beauty requires a certain "active" passivity that allows understanding to grasp the world through the senses. It is no coincidence that during the same period, Diderot ventured into a strange "anatomic-

metaphysical” project that drew lessons from the blind and the deaf-mute in experimentation that led him to closely explore bodily perception (Sejten, 2000, pp. 99–144). Learning from the blind helped Diderot to put forward the idea of autonomous bodily knowledge, which is based solely on sensorial receptivity and is beyond understanding and reason. Similarly, his observations of the deaf-mute indicated the existence of a language beyond ordinary language; that is, a far more musical language that was capable of making sense of sensuous polyphonies.

For Diderot, beauty, slightly troubling, acts beyond will, apprehending human beings through the senses, which is more captivating than the entitlement to master beauty through understanding. Implicitly cultivating sensibility becomes part of living practice, which commits itself to optimizing and intensifying experiences of beauty.

Nineteenth century tableau: Idealistic counter-reactions

The liberation of beauty from idealism, however, cannot be complete, even though aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century gained a solid philosophical foundation in the judgment of beauty based solely on a fabulous (although seemingly frail) feeling of pleasure. In the Enlightenment in general and in Kant in particular, the intensity of this feeling refers to the subject itself, celebrating less what has triggered that feeling than the subject’s own capacity to conceive freely without concepts and to share cultural humanity. This ambiguity is one of the reasons for the renewed troubling of beauty. Although unchained from its former union with morality and truth, beauty encounters unmistakably re-idealizing movements during the nineteenth century. The Kantian legacy had already been taken into opposite directions by its immediate philosophical successors. Schiller reformulated the famous Kantian free play of the imagination and understanding toward the pedagogical humanism of *Bildung*, whereas Hegel literally dismissed the “aesthetic” in its sensuous aspects— “as a mere name it [the word “Aesthetics”] is a matter of indifference to us” (Hegel, 1975)—in order to confine beauty to the sole domain of art. For Hegel, the nascent philosophical discipline of aesthetics identifies the “spacious realm of the beautiful” with the “province of art.” It was less metaphorically formulated when Hegel (1975) resumed the scientific approach of his inquiry into beauty: “our science is Philosophy of Art and, more definitely, Philosophy of Fine Art.”

A similar promotion of beauty in the name of art takes place in Schopenhauer’s opus magnum, *The World as Will and Idea*, from 1819. In undisguised Platonic terms, Schopenhauer posed the epistemological question of which knowledge might lead to the ideas:

What kind of knowledge is concerned with that which is outside and independent of all relations, that which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and therefore is known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the Ideas, which are the direct and adequate objectivity of the thing in-itself, the will? (Schopenhauer, 1919, pp. 238–239)

In response to this elaborate question, Schopenhauer highlighted Art as the answer and provided a similar rhetorically and sharply worded reply:

We answer, Art, the work of genius. It repeats or reproduces the eternal Ideas grasped through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding in all the phenomena of the world; and according to what the material is in which it reproduces, it is sculpture or painting, poetry or music. (Schopenhauer, 1919, p. 239)

Even though art solely represents an incomplete and temporary means of emancipating human beings from the will, as art in Hegel absorbs itself in the odyssey of absolute spirit, art also has the power to accomplish what Plato denied it: the direct access to the world of Ideas.

These paramount philosophical elaborations of aesthetics during the early nineteenth century not only illustrate that, almost exclusively, aesthetics has become a philosophy of art. They clearly testify that beauty within that movement again became metaphysical. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer reconducted beauty to a new form of idealism. Hegel's *Idea* was derived from the Platonic form and idea even though it differed from Plato by combining concept and concrete reality. Nonetheless, *artistic beauty* serves a higher purpose in the dialectical self-realization of the total spirit.

In addition to the re-idealization of beauty, things are not much better in terms of what has become of the philosophy of taste based on the idea of sensible immediacy. Initially, and especially during the German Enlightenment, as evidenced in Schiller, the concept of taste entailed *Bildung*, which emphasizes the need for education and cultivation. However, if taste, in the first place, stands for the theoretical appreciation of a direct, unmediated sensuous access to beauty, the concept remains ideologically problematic to justify in the long run, as argued by Christoph Menke (2012). On one hand, taste is truly emancipating because it allows the subject to independently assess and yet lays claim to universal validity. On the other hand, taste is soon compromised by social determinations and overruled by a specific—bourgeois—standard of taste before eventually being absorbed by hidden power agendas (Menke, 2012, pp. 226–239), which is our understanding of taste today. In its modernized and standardized version, taste presents a sociological diversity of domains of taste, such as taste in fashion, taste in music, and taste in cooking. From Georg Simmel to Pierre Bourdieu, sociology has mainly explored taste in relation to culture and value.

The double, antagonistic pressure on beauty, which is not only absolutized in speculative idealism but also banalized by social coding, should not prevent us from summing up the long-lasting outcome of the generalized view of beauty in this tableau. Manifestly, the decisive impact of eighteenth-century philosophy consists in tying the concept of beauty to the arts. Aesthetics swiftly became a philosophy of art. However, this alliance with art launched beauty over further troubled waters. Most importantly, the aesthetic dimension, with its sensitive constitution, seems at risk. Furthermore, the valorization of the arts as the only valuable entry to beauty considerably reduces the areas in which beauty may be experienced. However, the sanctification of art and the corresponding devaluation of aesthetic receptivity may lead to a more moderate and more radical claim. Without excluding other types of objects or experiences, artworks may represent elaborated things that are explicitly aimed at evoking aesthetical emotions, thus intensifying living practice in its entirety.

This affirmation was partially strongly formulated by Nietzsche in the second half of the eighteenth century. In his notorious declaration in *The Birth of Tragedy* from 1867, Nietzsche took his nearest philosophical predecessors to a new higher level, especially Schopenhauer, whom he quoted extensively in literally assigning human life to art—“we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art”—only to make the hidden rupture provocative. According to Nietzsche, art and life are assimilated, “for it is *only* as an *aesthetic* phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally *justified*” (Nietzsche, 1910, p. 50). Accordingly, Nietzsche insisted on a specifically aesthetic core of art. Beauty trouble certainly gained renewed force from that point.

Twentieth-century tableau: Oscillations between the beautiful and the sublime

The evolution of beauty outlined above hides some reasons that the vocabulary of beauty became old-fashioned relatively early. Beauty has suffered from more than just being confined to idealism. The fall of beauty, in large part, has involved its complicity with a traditionalist, if not manifestly conservative and bourgeois, register of taste. Some of the most visionary intellectual sensibilities since the end of the nineteenth century were aware of the changes by which beauty may become an antiquated concept. For example, in 1928, Paul Valéry asked whether “the Moderns still make any use of it,” only to conclude that “the Beautiful is no longer in vogue,” and that “Beauty is a kind of dying person” (Valéry, 1957, pp. 1239–1240)⁴.

An eminent connoisseur of art, Valéry, who was both a poet and an art critic, knew what he was talking about. As fond as Hegel was of classicist paintings and the ideals of beauty that underpin them, modern painters from the Age of Impressionism and forward have been eager to ruin the academic codification of beauty. Likewise, in dawning Modernist poetry, of which Baudelaire and Mallarmé are prime examples, writers have claimed to serve Art instead of providing the leading classes with splendid literary works that might legitimate their position in society. When Modern art eventually coincided with Modernism, beauty became too pleasing, too facile, too conformist, and a slippery slope that must be avoided⁵.

However, Valéry and his fellow kindred spirits were skeptical about what could replace the beautiful when beauty was increasingly subsumed as entertainment, or according to Valéry (1957), “all the values of the chock have supplanted Beauty.” This concern is even more urgent today because society is currently characterized by the phenomena of increasing aestheticization, which calls for analogous reflection. There is undoubtedly no direct return to the eighteenth-century aesthetics category of taste or to highly speculative beauty. However, between taste’s early developments in bourgeois identity and future mass consumerism and between autonomy and the market, in recent philosophy, innovative conceptualizations have responded to the need for rethinking beauty in aesthetics.

The reappearance of the concept of the sublime during the 1980s among French philosophers featured new departures in aesthetics⁶. Compared to beauty’s trajectory, the sublime embarked on what could be described as a glamorous career, at least since French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard promoted it as a core concept, which was particularly dynamic and powerful in inspiring philosophical thought. The sublime proved capable, apparently much more so than beauty, of grasping modern art, avant-garde art, and contemporary art, which most people consider obscure, if not utterly incomprehensible.

The sublime, in fact, refers to an art that ruins the very idea of an infinitely pleasant and harmonious experience of beauty. The feeling of the sublime is characterized by an eminently discordant and double structure that, according to Burke, is torn between sorrow and enjoyment and between terror and delight. In Kant’s epistemological terminology the dichotomy is between the failure of the imagination to present perceivable forms and the exhilarating enthusiasm in which reason surpasses this failure of imagination. All these negative features relate to the task to which Lyotard (2012) summoned art and critical thought to present the non-presentable: “*présenter l’imprésentable*.”

4 Translated by the author.

5 For an updated discussion of beauty critically informed by art, see Danto, A. (2002). The abuse of beauty. *Daedalus*, 131(4), 35–56. www.jstor.org/stable/20027805.

6 See *Du sublime* (1988), a collection with contributions from, e.g., Jean-François Lyotard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Louis Marin et Jean-Luc Nancy. Paris: Belin.

If the sublime dismisses beauty and eventually replaces beauty, why return to beauty? Most refreshingly, Sianne Ngai has advocated for replacing both the beautiful and the sublime by three entirely new categories—the zany, the cute, and the interesting—as the only means of making sense in the “hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (Ngai, 2012, p. 1). Ngai’s three categories are of great interest because they systematically elucidate the aesthetic experience of being part of “socially binding processes:” the zany in relation to “production;” the cute in relation to the sphere of “consumption;” even the interesting, which might have some similarities to the sublime, is confined to the sphere of mere “circulation” of information (Ngai, 2012, p. 1).

The consequence of submitting adjusted aesthetical concepts to social immersion, however, is that they expand sociologically but diminish aesthetically. Ngai emphasizes their relative “lack of power” and their “weakness” in terms of “aesthetic impact” compared with the classic feelings of the sublime and the beautiful that were both supposed to be “powerfully felt” (Ngai, 2017, pp. 18–19). Therefore, finally, beauty has very little application in Ngai’s project. As she asserted, the feeling of the beautiful is necessarily a strong one. In troubleshooting, she proposed replacing the beautiful by more socially adjusted categories, indicating that she implicitly agreed to understand beauty and the nature of beauty as relying on aesthetic and affective immersion. Only the diagnosis of late modern lifestyles seems to leave little space for that kind of experience. Simultaneously, Ngai’s approach exposes a socially determined negotiation of the relationship between the aesthetic and the artistic, insofar as aestheticization conditions generally led her to stress the prevalence of popular, entertaining, and even infantile emotions in late capitalist society.

A quite different strategy for insisting on beauty’s lasting relevance in aesthetics remains latently associated with the concept of the sublime, which, paradoxically, was supposed to overcome beauty. Rethinking the sublime concerns beauty. The sublime does not exclude the beautiful; instead, it connects to the beautiful if not as an inclusive concept in aesthetics that is at least part of the sublime, then as an intensified feeling of pleasure. Initially, Kant confirmed the interconnectedness between the two categories when he affirmed that the feeling of the sublime did not necessitate a proper transcendental deduction but could be based on that of the feeling of beauty. Even Lyotard did not fail to credit the beautiful in Kant when he confirmed that the great philosophical importance of the beautiful and the sublime in the third *Critique* resides in the “derealization of the object” (Lyotard, 1986, p. 45), which affects aesthetic feelings *per se*.

Twenty–twenty-first century tableau: Appearing beauty

The German philosopher Martin Seel appears to address these inner ties between the sublime and the beautiful through the notion of “appearing,” which he promoted as “a promising basic concept of aesthetics” (Seel, 2005, p. xiii). Seel argues for the necessity of tracing the aesthetic experience back to a common ground of perception independent of what is perceived, which, in the first place, situates the investigation in nature outside art, but does not exclude art in its further steps. This reorientation of aesthetics toward nature, which extended the topic of Seel’s habitation thesis, *Aesthetics of Nature* (1991), also modifies the understanding of the sublime. The opposite is true in French poststructuralism. Lyotard emphasized the validity of the sublime and its philosophical pertinence almost exclusively in art, whereas Seel aims to unfold the sublime in relation to nature. Likewise, the sublime, according to Lyotard, was essentially elaborated on with respect to time, whereas Seel explores the sublime mainly in relation to space (Hoffmann,

2006, pp. 19–48).

This shift in perspective allows Seel to connect the sublime and the beautiful in terms of a tension between the two. From that point, the categorical separation between the sublime and the beautiful corresponds to a hypothetical and ideal line of demarcation, rather than justifying the reality of two essentially different aesthetic sensations and experiences. In other words, if the beautiful and the sublime are to be differentiated gradually and not categorically, the cause of their aesthetic capacity must be sought in the same elementary condition from which they both emerge. According to Seel, appearing occupies that crossing point. The beautiful and the sublime both appear to our senses; their ontological status, strictly speaking, is less “to be” than “to appear.” They are inseparable from their appearing nature, which marks their inner link to nature.

In tracing aesthetics to nature, another basic precondition in aesthetics is revealed, that of contemplation, which Seel placed as the fundamental layer of his aesthetics of nature (Seel, 1991, pp. 38–88); here, beauty takes the lead. Appearing connects to beauty in the most spontaneous contemplation of nature. Objects of nature, whether organic or inorganic, are beautiful as long as they simply occupy or fill contemplation; they last as long as contemplation lasts. They are as they appear, which is the reason for their beauty. In this specific contemplation mode, objects of nature are beautiful, simply because they seem to be in the world for no reason except the perception of their appearance. This is also the reason that there is not really anything to understand in this experience of beauty, in which phenomenal givenness and the contemplative gaze co-exist and nourish each other.

Regardless of how far this minimal natural beauty may be from the sublime and beauty in superior levels of the aesthetic experience in art or elsewhere (also in nature), when imagination and reason participate more actively than in pure and free contemplation, the condition of appearing continues to provide a common ground for both beauty and the sublime. What is captivating is perhaps less than whether the world appears in visible, perceivable proportions (as in the classical beautiful) or in visible disproportion to the subject’s possibilities of perceiving (as in the classical sublime). It might be more fascinating to experience what is not harmonious in that which is harmonious and what is harmonious in that which is not. Modern poetry from Baudelaire onward certainly mirrors that ambition, and we might say that the collaboration of beauty and the sublime generally enhances the intensity of the aesthetic experience, as if each lacks suspense without the other. Beauty that pacifies without troubling is not beauty; the sublime that is disquieting without being uplifting is not sublime. In fact, combining the beautiful and the sublime might not even be incompatible with Lyotard, for whom “derealization” is constitutive in both.

In addition to being chosen as an exponent of a certain return to beauty in aesthetics, this debate on the sublime should benefit from Seel, as far as he invites us to consider the asymmetry between beauty and sublime in the former’s favor. While an element of beauty is inherent in the sublime, the former can exist without any admixture of the latter. Apprehending beauty through the sublime is completed by bearing witness to the persistence of beauty and to its extraordinary transversal ability to emerge in places and situations where it is least expected. Might it be that beauty runs through all levels of the aesthetic? Or that the difference between the beautiful and the sublime may not be understood consistently if they are not seen as being oppositions *within* beauty? Returning to the beautiful through the sublime thus accentuates the paradoxical relationship between beauty and appearing. Beauty itself does not appear, but beauty is inseparable from appearing. According to Walter Benjamin, “semblance belongs to the

essentially beautiful as the veil covering something else”, while specifying “[u]nveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous [*unscheinbar*]” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 351).

Rephrasing beauty between the aesthetic and the artistic

Our rough outline of the determining features of beauty throughout the relatively young discipline of aesthetic philosophy includes constellations varying between “the aesthetic” and “the artistic,” both of which are assigned to form part of “the beautiful.” Diderot valued the aesthetic component and paid little attention to art, whereas Hegel excluded the aesthetic dimension from his philosophy of art. Although it is distributed differently, this controversy also affects the dissimilar approaches to the sublime taken by Lyotard and Seel. Obviously, emphasizing that aesthetic objects are basically objects of appearing encourages rethinking the relationship between the aesthetic and the artistic. Anglophone philosophers in particular have pleaded in favor of establishing a clear analytical distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic (Best, 1982)⁷, but Seel elaborated the issue differently.

On one hand, in its elementary aesthetic sense, to be beautiful implies the condition of appearing. A thing must appear in such a way that it shows itself to be intrinsically valuable. Beauty, accordingly, takes on its aesthetic significance at that elementary level. Here art has no exclusive right to beauty. In the proper sense of the word, the horizon of the aesthetic resembles unlimited. All objects and situations may occupy or temporarily captivate a given observer, be they romantic gardens, lovely people, fancy cell phones, or amazing Italian coffee makers. That is why the aesthetic of everyday experience must be taken into consideration, provided that it enables an encounter with a relieving or enchanting present, appearing here and now. Moreover, when addressing aestheticization phenomena, this issue does not seem satisfactorily solved by referring—at least without further elaboration—to the Kantian distinction between pure beauty and dependent beauty, disinterested beauty without any purpose, and purposive beauty.

On the other hand, artworks indubitably constitute a sphere of their own. Seel’s main focus on appearing provides inspiration in defining that distinctive otherness according to the artwork’s specific ways of appearing. Artworks appear in a particular way; they do not simply appear as nature does but show themselves in their appearing. Therefore, they also must rely on reception and acknowledgment. The word “work” in “artwork” or “work of art” signifies participation; the spectator, reader, and listener must ascertain and discover what a work of art brings into the world. In short, to pursue the interplay of words, artworks work in us, and we have to work on them to interpret and come to terms with their more or less idiosyncratic language.

However, the influential distinction that Beardsley (1979) proposed between aesthetic and artistic values ignores the fact that all artistic production is the creation of unique appearances in the world, which are specific appearances, because artworks display unique interpretations of the world. Artworks are elaborate signs and more than merely things. Nonetheless, artistic presentation is rooted in embodied perceptions, sensations, and affections. Duchamp and Warhol, who needed appearance, needed to insist on appearance and to exhibit the puzzles and entanglements of aesthetic and artistic beauty. In art, even non-appearing is a matter of appearing. Likewise, many beautifully designed objects may join the world of artworks because they produce aesthetically intense meaning.

⁷ More recently Jean Marie Shaeffer (2015) has followed the same path.

Beauty and nature

If beauty can still lay claim to being essential in aesthetics and art in general, it is because artworks, in their own way of appearing to the viewer, are unique and remarkable as well as captivating and powerful. From this perspective, it makes sense to maintain the hypothesis that beauty is a broad concept that includes the sublime. However, although art has moved away from presumed classical forms of beauty, the aesthetic remains both an essential and a defining aspect of art⁸. As Gilles Deleuze convincingly demonstrated, whoever does not regard the paintings of Francis Bacon as beautiful will not be able to find what is troubling about them. Of course, in this context, what is beautiful refers to the forces actualized by Bacon's colorful and distorted paintings and not merely to the intellectual interest someone might take in these artworks but to what constitutes their aesthetic dynamism and affects beyond affections (Deleuze, 2003). In Deleuze's thought, the major concepts relate to intense beauty. How do we evoke these states of "events" and "lines of becomings," as valorized by Deleuze, without implying an element of beauty or without implying the joy of being transported elsewhere by sensation alone to connect with the intensity and multiplicity of life through concrete, empirical sensations that cannot be unfamiliar to beauty?

Beauty's persistent ability to appear when least expected is rather troubling. If beauty can be reaffirmed at the edge of modern and contemporary art, which for other art theoreticians has proven its final disappearance, more solid arguments are needed in pleading for the genuinely aesthetically beautiful. For that purpose, referring again to Deleuze might be helpful. In his thesis, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze launched the project of "transcendental empiricism," in which concrete and empirical sensation is the vital conceptual framework in which the new philosophy of difference coincides with aesthetics:

Empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetics an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that what can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible: difference, potential difference and difference in intensity as the reasons behind qualitative diversity. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 56–57)

By affirming that sensation is immanent to unknown material forces because of the ability to "apprehend directly" within the sensible, Deleuze clearly demonstrated the ontological assumption of his project. In sensation, we meet what transcends us as far as "the very being of the sensible" literary puts human beings in touch with life in its intensity and multiplicities.

On the ontological horizon of sensation, beauty may join another similar fabulous border concept in aesthetics, that of nature. In Deleuze, nature signifies the concrete and empirical field in which radical difference can be sensed and thus "experimented." Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual rhizome underpins a radical understanding of nature, claiming that "in nature roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 5). Seel, although more phenomenologically oriented, also insists on thinking about nature as incommensurable with "difference."⁹ Human experiences of nature, he argues, provide encounters with something that cannot be fully translated into culture or reason, something that resists any cultural capacity. However,

⁸ Simultaneously, a figurative return to nature has taken place in contemporary art. If modern art seems to testify to the opposite in conducting the process of emancipation of art from the fixation on unambiguous images of familiar figures from the external world, many contemporary artists have actually returned to figurative painting in addition to drawing attention to nature; e.g., the works of Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, and Andreas Gursky clearly show the appropriation of natural configurations.

⁹ In German, "*Differenz von Natur*" (Seel, 1991, p. 14).

critical theory's grand old master, Theodor W. Adorno, had already emphasized the complex interrelations between art and nature. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno attempted to rescue Kantian natural beauty or more precisely to dialecticize Hegelian cultural beauty (*Kulturschönen*) through Kant's natural beauty (*Naturschönen*). Most surprisingly, Adorno insisted that natural beauty marks the very inner life of beauty: "The more strictly the works of art refrain from natural proliferations and imitation of nature, the more closely the successful ones approach nature" (Adorno, 1997, p. 120).

This quotation may be used as a motto for uncovering a central common thread in the visual arts of the last two centuries. In the change from a supposedly traditional, classical imitation of nature to the pictorial adaptation of the very forces of figuration beyond representation, nature continues to articulate a radical otherness, while simultaneously being both the source of beauty and the unbridgeable difference from it. What matters from Adorno's critical point of view is that artworks have the potential to reveal the following: what is real about reality is richer than all the appearances we could attempt to fix in the language of conceptual knowledge. Underlying the work of art is that reality is not just a collection of facts because it reveals the difference between determinable appearance and indeterminable appearance, which points to the return of the sublime at the heart of beauty. Rightfully, Adorno quoted Valéry in recalling the perspective that Lyotard followed in elaborating the sublime: "Beauty demands, perhaps, the slavish imitation of what is indeterminable in things" (Adorno, 1997, p. 120)¹⁰.

The assumption that a reciprocal relationship exists between aesthetic nature and art may join the classical formulation that Kant presents in section 45 of *Critique of Judgment*: "Nature, we say, is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature" (Kant, 1987, p. 174). In answering the question whether free nature or free art should serve as the model for aesthetic perception and production, Kant disentangles a complex relationship between nature and art. Commenting on Kant's argument, Seel persistently identifies a "double exemplariness":

Kant's solution lies in the thesis of a double exemplariness of nature for art and of art for nature. The presence of aesthetically perceived nature is a model for the inner vitality of the work of art; the imagination of the work of art, on the other hand, is at least one model for an intensive perception of nature. The reciprocal fecundation of art and aesthetic nature arises only when nature, among other things, can be perceived as successful art and when art, among other things, can be perceived as free nature, without the difference between art and nature being extinguished. It is neither nature perceived in the appearance of art nor art perceived in the appearance of nature that Kant establishes as the norm of an unrestrained aesthetic consciousness, but rather a dialogue between art and nature. (Seel, 2015)

Seel is correct in arguing that that dialogue is still "ours" (2015). Especially when beauty is scrutinized in the much broader context of a complex cultural landscape, it becomes evident that domains besides art, from high-tech design to the broadest sense of everyday life, embrace profound aesthetic experience as much as art does. Beauty, nature, and culture continue to cross, define, enlighten, and challenge each other on the same ground that gave rise to aesthetics in philosophical thought, where our inquiry began with Diderot: sensuously and bodily embedded

¹⁰ The translation diverges slightly from the original French: "Le beau exige peut-être l'imitation servile de ce qui est indéfinissable dans les choses."

experience.

The pivotal foundation of aesthetics, the body and the underlying bodily relationship between art and nature, also suggests what requires further exploration in the field of somaesthetics. Based on the cases selected here, the most stimulating beauty trouble the present inquiry encounters concerns the permanent, yet differently valued, inner, intuitive access to what merits the name of beauty because of that same inner, intuitive constitution. However, the circular ingrown ability of beauty is not natural but must be cultivated and practiced, which is what art partly does and what explains why much theorization of the beauty conceived by artists often refers to a two-foldedness within beauty. For example, Baudelaire (2010) specified two kinds of beauty—universal and ephemeral—which inhabit each other. Ruskin insisted on natural creation in architecture: “Man cannot advance in the invention of beauty, without directly imitating natural forms” (1900, p. 101). Similarly, somaesthetics advocates the need to carry out the project of cultivating beauty to include everyone’s life as an art of life. As long as beauty keeps troubling us, there is hope for cherishing the quality of human life.

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