

Reframing Beauty: Body, Environment, Art – An Introduction

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What is beauty? This is probably the most enduring question in the history of aesthetics, one that remains unsatisfactorily answered even after 300 years of modern aesthetic research. Despite attempts by some theoreticians to classify it (Scruton, 2009; De Clerque, 2013; Zangwill, 2013), we lack a generally acceptable and unambiguous definition of beauty. Why it is so? The answer is not straightforward; every period, theoretician, and phenomenon has its own criteria and position based on the ‘situation’ of art, society, and culture.

More complex answers are suggested in the papers composing this issue of *ESPEs. The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics*. They prompt related and equally important inquiries, such as the relevance of this question today, the necessity of defining beauty, its role in aesthetics and everyday life, and what insights current scientific research offers on beauty. However, readers familiar with the development of aesthetic thought in the 20th century may wonder about the significance of this return to the issue of beauty, not just the category of beauty itself, but the notion and the attempt to define/reframe beauty in the 21st century after the so-called ‘century without beauty’.

Probably due to the decline of modernism and postmodernism, which minimized the importance of beauty in art, and the attempts to base (neuro)aesthetics on scientific foundations (Chatterjee, 2015; Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999; Zeki, 1999), beauty was brought once again to the forefront of aesthetic research at the end of the last century. Examples of this rehabilitation of beauty can be found in Danto (2003), Sartwell (2004), Nehamas (2007), Scruton (2009), Figal (2010), and others. Their works revealed that the classical concept and understanding of beauty required intense revision and reframing (e.g., Mothersill, 1984), akin to Derrida’s deconstruction. Theorists found it necessary to go back to the source

of the issue and phenomena, analyzing it step by step. Danto (2003) pursued a similar approach but ultimately failed to find new criteria of beauty or reframe beauty itself, lingering in the past while attempting to replace beauty with a different category.

The last decades have witnessed a growing interest in beauty, evident not only in the aesthetics of everyday life (e.g., Parsons and Carlsons, 2008; Saito, 2017), environmental aesthetics (e.g., Berleant, 1992; Sepanmaa, 1993; Carlsons and Lintott, 2008; Lehtinen, Kuisma and Mäcklin, 2019), and somaesthetics (e.g., Shusterman, 1999) but also in empirical research within empirical aesthetics (e.g., Menninghaus et al., 2019) and many other areas.

The convergence of new approaches and acceptance of different aesthetic phenomena prompts further questions: Are we prepared for a re-evaluation of beauty – a reconsideration of the role of beauty in art and everyday life? Is the topic of beauty still relevant and attractive in aesthetics?

The first serious question addressed in this issue of *ESPES* is whether we are truly aware of what the common yet aesthetically compelling concept of ‘beauty’ signifies. Although we intuitively know its meaning, a closer reflection reveals that the concept is multi-layered, ambiguous, and sometimes even unclear and indefinite. It is one of those ‘strong’ notions, according to Ricœur (1974), i.e., notions which mean too much and therefore they mean nothing or mean too many things at the same time, resulting in conflicting applications.

The presented studies in the journal problematize the concept of beauty among philosophers, aestheticians, or art theorists, as well as in the everyday language of art-untrained users. The papers contemplate what this ‘umbrella concept’ refers to and how its various semantic dimensions can be mapped. Do we designate the same thing with this term? Is there a way to verify it? The question arises whether such a conceptual understanding of the concept of beauty is necessary at all. The need for a pragmatic use in linguistic approach is also highlighted, for its crucial role in our understanding and use of a given notion, not restricted only to theoretical discourse alone – non-theoretical uses also influence, from a pragmatic perspective, the use of the notion as such (see e. g. Mandelbaum, 1970).

Even after considering the linguistic/analytic/terminological approach, the notion of beauty is still not charted in its complexity and opens new questions, as the ‘reframing’ of beauty is not fulfilled. Is beauty a matter of things, of their objective qualities and forms? Or is it rather a property relating to our perceptions, judgments, and experiences? Is it something empirically real, or is it ‘just’ an idea, a concept, or an entity of our thinking and experiencing? Does it exist independently of us, and does it make sense to think about it only through the perspective of the beholder? Is it necessary to learn to perceive it, or is it instinctively obvious? Is there a universal beauty, or are there countless diverse and incomparable types? How do the idea and ideal of beauty change over time, and how do political, social, cultural, and other geopolitical factors influence them?

Some phenomenologists (e.g., Heidegger, 1985, p. 242) believe that beauty opens the possibility for us to see concealed aspects of reality – that beauty attracts and unveils ‘knowledge’ about things that would otherwise remain hidden from us. It is thus an initial, transitional station toward understanding things in their unhiddenness. However, Gadamer (1960, p. 481) argues that beauty reveals itself to us without the need for any conceptual pre-understanding. Beauty is visible, evident in itself, and immediately accessible through contemplation. Its value does not need to be illuminated by concepts. This allows it to simultaneously claim, in a Kantian sense, its general validity and obligatoriness. According to these phenomenologists, beautiful things assume they are beautiful for everyone and not just subjectively pleasing to somebody. Beauty, therefore, only needs to be shown, and those who are not blinded by it can (must?) perceive it. But is it truly so?

It seems that the most common way to think about beauty is through its ostentatious presentation – encountering it significant examples. Literature, museums, galleries, or concert halls are spaces where we often confront what other people generally consider beautiful. These are places where beauty can be glimpsed, sometimes in its timeless form and other times as a reflection of the contemporary and contextual perception, but always in the most concentrated form and in its evident presence. However, understanding beauty extends beyond grand concert halls and exhibition spaces to encompass every kind of aesthetic reality.

Beauty is part of our everyday life. We surround ourselves with it, seek it out, beautify ourselves (Davies, 2020), and our dwellings (ESPES 11/2, 2022), and choose things based on whether we like them or not. This happens in partner selection, fashion, the media industry, architecture, utility design, and more. Beauty has always influenced and still influences (Davies, 2020), our preferences even where we might not expect it (Schellekens, 2008).

On the other hand, this everyday and often common beauty becomes banal or less visible due to its obviousness. Compared to it, we seek extraordinary ‘high’ or conversely ‘deep’ beauty that shakes, touches, and moves us. It is this kind of beauty that Scruton describes as an experience of transcendence, the perception of the value of Being (Scruton, 2009). It is precisely this extraordinary beauty that we seek from time to time.

Despite some theorists suggesting beauty may have somewhat disappeared from the center of artistic production, beauty remains an important part of our existence and may have even evolved and taken new forms. We believe – and the following papers may illustrate this claim sufficiently – that with an increasing saturation of other life needs, beauty is once again coming to the forefront of our interest and desire. It is only natural that with changes in the world, the forms of beauty we produce and long for, as well as our understanding of ourselves and our needs, are changing. With new knowledge and possibilities, the need for a reassessment of beauty and its meaning to us arises.

The approach to review and reframe beauty can focus on three areas: 1/ The notion of beauty as a linguistic form (Démuth and Démuthová), 2/ Aesthetic properties of an object or phenomena that make it beautiful (Focosi and Corvino, Furia, Kirwan, Kišoňová, Nacif, Raccanelli), 3/ A special kind of experience necessary to experience beauty (Furia, Kirwan, Kolditz).

In the current issue, all three areas are present. The issue begins with the paper by James Kirwan, titled *To What Does the Word 'Beauty' Refer?*. He starts with a short but crucial comment: we need to focus on the aesthetic properties of objects considered beautiful and perceive them through aesthetic experience. According to him, beauty is not something causing an aesthetic experience. This position is important in the understanding and critical evaluation of later papers, for example that by Brit Kolditz. In defining beauty, Kirwan tries to base his analysis not on common features of beautiful properties (as is customary in finding necessary and sufficient conditions) but on different characteristics of aesthetic properties. He builds his essay on the idea that “although an aesthetic property exists only in attribution, what property is attributed will depend on the presence of certain objective properties: properties that are necessary, though not sufficient, to arouse a particular feeling about the object.” His paper is a complex contribution to the discussed issue that disputes the need for a universal formula of beauty and comments on the issue of beautiful objects, e.g., a human face.

Andrej Démuth and Slávka Démuthová contribute to the issue with the paper *On the Indeterminacy of the Concept of Beauty and the Reasons for its Use*. The ambiguity of the notion of beauty is the central issue of the paper, creating a paradox in its usage. The aim of the paper is to find reasons for using the notion despite the lack of valid and clear rules of applying the word itself. The authors proceed from a linguistic-semantic (epistemological, semantic, conceptual) and empirical analysis of the connotations of the concept of beauty to uncover evolutionary, existential, and transcendental reasons for applying the category of beauty.

A case study about one possible conception of beauty is proposed by Filippo Focosi and Pier Francesco Corvino in their paper *Another look at Jared S. Monroe's Comprehensive View of Beauty*. At its core, the paper is not a historical analysis aimed at re-interpreting one text from a different point of view. Even if it provides an overview of the 1942 paper *Beauty as Harmony* by Jared S. Moore, the main reasons both authors choose this piece is Moore's understanding of classic theories, which he finds defective. Both authors view Monroe's approach as a modernization of the classic theory of beauty and, therefore, as an actualization and reframing of the concept itself. This reframing could be inspiring even for the present time and deserves more attention. Focosi and Corvino understand the analysed paper as a modernization of the formalist account of beauty, narrowing the notion to help define the class of beautiful objects.

Another methodological yet thematic piece, the first paper in the field of environmental aesthetics is present in the paper *Beauty Between Space, Place,*

and Landscape: Recovering the Substantive and Normative Character of Beauty by Paolo Furla. The central idea of the paper is “that the geographical concepts of space and place are the locus of a possible recuperation of the relationships between the beautiful and the good”. The interchangeable use of the notion space and place is criticized, with a focus on the importance of beauty. Both terms are discussed not only from an aesthetic point of view but also from the position of spatial theory, with the aesthetic approach, through the category of beauty, being crucial. The leitmotif of the paper, yet not the final conclusion, is that beauty is a determinant responsible for a change of space into place. This argument is later developed in the context of the environment.

A second, slightly unconventional contribution to environmental aesthetics (or atmosphere discourse) is offered by Brit Kolditz with his paper *Focusing on the Loss of the Sky-Blue Environment*. This paper is implicitly more environmentally focused in the meaning of the engaging approach used, but the category of beauty is used comprehensively, placing the beauty of the blue sky at its center. The central issue of this paper are the changing aesthetic properties of the blue sky, possibly escaping our perception. Kolditz wonders why the sky is not a part of broader discussions and realizes that we are only able to see it from a distance and not directly participate in it. This may be one of the reasons why this huge, visible part of our everyday life is not also to this extent present in the aesthetic discourse. The main focus of the author is to create an inspirational paper intended ‘to stimulate aesthetes and aestheticians to have their own lived experiences and to look up to the sky’, and at the same time, to stimulate further aesthetic thoughts.

Laura Raccanelli brings a critical-based analysis in the paper *Varnishing Facades, Erasing Memory: Reading Urban Beautification with Critical Whiteness Studies*. It is a contribution to urban aesthetics, but at the same time, it could be classified as a contribution to postcolonial discourse. Her aim is to demonstrate the role of visibility in the spatial organization of stigmatized neighborhoods of cities, with an emphasis on the racist configuration of urban space. This paper focuses on understanding how top-down beautification operations, masking processes of racial discrimination, mitigate the symbolic and structural violence inherent in aestheticization operations. Beauty, in her account, is clearly understood as a canon, a social outcome or fact, that is able in its normativity to have a negative effect, influencing the form of regulation of life and potentially becoming a tool of discrimination because beauty is a discursive construction. She puts urban beautification in connection with discrimination and addresses it from the perspective of ‘neocolonialism’. Beauty and beautification are, therefore, understood as something dangerous when implemented without the knowledge of a special and complex context.

Reacting to Kirwan’s example of the beauty of the human face is Renáta Kišňová’s paper titled *Beauty of Human Face in Contemporary Interdisciplinary Discourse*. The paper focuses on the analysis of facial beauty in the context of contemporary interdisciplinary research (especially contemporary cognitive science, neuropsychology, and evolutionary biology). It explores reasons for preferences towards some faces, delving into the mechanism of evaluating

faces and the evolutionary determination of facial beauty perception. The author proposes three parameters for measuring facial beauty according to Anjan Chatterjee (2015): averageness, symmetry, and sexual dimorphism, completing them with the 'straight profile' aspect. This paper is mainly a general analysis of contemporary discourse, offering valuable insight into a complex but informative contribution.

The thematic section of this issue of *ESPES* concludes with a short paper, *Hiroshima's Bag Lady: Increasing the Parameters of the Real* by Luciana Nunes Nacif. Her focus is on fashion designer Rei Kawakubo and her 1981 Paris collection, with the intention "to question one of the axioms of Western culture: the French monopoly of elegance..." (Vinken, 2023, p. 20) and therefore, the monopoly of beauty in the fashion industry. Nacif identifies three aspects of Kawakubo's work that are crucial for the issue of beauty: negative aesthetics, the 'hack' of the fashion system, and the concept of deconstruction in fashion. This deconstruction is visible in the new search for beauty, in the search for a 'new' beauty and the establishment of a novel relationship between beauty and fashion. Despite its brevity, this contribution clearly shows the evolving understanding of beauty based on a conceptual and deeper understanding of phenomena.

The editorial board of *ESPES* and guest-editor Andrej Démuth aspired to foster a new discourse on the concept of beauty, contemplating it in new situations and uncovering fresh perspectives. While the endeavour may have been ambitious, part of this initiative was to find and identify a 'new beauty'. The papers in this thematic issue can be divided into two categories: a) methodological papers about beauty (Kirwan, Démuth and Démuthová, Focosi and Corvino), b) discussions and discoveries about new areas of beauty (Furia, Nacif, Kišoňová, Kolditz, Raccanelli). While the papers did not yield a definitive definition of beauty for the 21st century, some similar (although partial) conclusions emerged about the normative nature of beauty. Humans remain central to understanding and defining the properties of beauty, with as much diversity identified in people as in the beautiful objects of everyday life or in art.

Ultimately, determining whether the issue fulfilled the expectations of the editorial board of *ESPES* is a challenging task. The evaluation of this theoretical contribution lies in the hands of other theoreticians and readers of the journal. As editors, we are convinced that some degree of reframing occurred. We hope that this issue will serve as at least another catalyst for future discussions on the subject.

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