

# Beauty Again

## On Singularity, Truth, and the Conditions of Art Today

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This paper examines the role of beauty in the history and theory of art, arguing that its marginalization in the late twentieth century has led to a crisis in the relation between art, truth, and action. Drawing on Nietzsche's conception of life as an aesthetic phenomenon and Plato's critique of mimetic art, the paper traces the gradual displacement of beauty by rational, institutional, and conceptual frameworks. It further analyzes the emergence of kitsch and the increasing mediation of meaning in contemporary art. Against this development, beauty is reconsidered as a condition of immediacy, singularity, and judgment. The paper concludes that the reintroduction of beauty is essential for restoring the possibility of meaning in art and life. Paradoxically, if beauty is not restored as a constitutive value of art – just as truth is to science and justice to politics – the very distinctions between performance and truth, presentation and reality, pretending and genuine emotional expression, original and fake, true action and its simulation risk collapsing. Beauty, as singular necessity – as exercised and exemplified in art – is the condition for meaning in art, and therefore in life. | *Keywords: Beauty, Aesthetics, Singularity, Modern Art, Kitsch, Plato, Nietzsche*

### 1. Greeks: Art as the Justification of Life

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, while exploring the origins of Western art, Friedrich Nietzsche introduces the metaphor of 'life as a work of art'. For the Greeks, life was justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon – not merely at the level of the individual, but as a mode of being that extended to the life of an entire culture. In their aesthetic conception of life, the Greeks composed their destiny – out of contingency – into a work of art, guided by a sense of beauty and aesthetic sensibility, in which, as in a musical symphony, all actions and individual parts, governed by an 'aesthetic necessity', held a permanent and non-interchangeable place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's (1967, §1) claim that "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" constitutes the central thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Such an artistic attitude to life, in which beauty and truth were one, however, came to an end, Nietzsche claims, with Plato and his introduction of the *other world*. Plato, for Nietzsche, replaced art with metaphysics, thereby denying the 'actual' by displacing all values and norms from the world into a super-empirical realm of Ideas.

Hence, whereas the wise and virtuous man in ancient Greece dwelled in the real world – 'he was it', living all values by exemplifying them in action – in the period following Plato, Nietzsche would argue, human beings came to believe that truth lay outside their existence, outside themselves. By removing an essential part of who they were and relocating it elsewhere, they became weak, vulnerable, sickly, and humble – they became 'all too human'.

The *true world*, as Nietzsche describes in *How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth* (1968), gradually became something unattainable – beyond human experience, perception, and comprehension. The role of moralities, religions, philosophies, and all the *teachers of the purpose of existence*, such as Plato, was thus to justify the meaning of life by appealing to something external to it and by denying the actual – which, for Nietzsche, constitutes a denial of life itself.<sup>2</sup>

The Greeks *knew and felt the terror and horror of existence*, yet they understood that all values must be sought and found in actuality. And since no one can endure the anxiety of experiencing reality as merely contingent and meaningless when reduced to bare facts, it is only through art that life becomes bearable – and indeed possible.

Art engages the actual; yet, in its detachment from literal facts, the work of art transforms actuality into something meaningful and life-affirming. Beauty, as understood here, does not adhere to fixed aesthetic norms; rather, it emerges each time anew as a singular event through which actuality becomes newly visible. In genuine art, the 'what' cannot be disentangled from the 'how': what the work reveals becomes inseparable from the manner of its revelation. It is precisely this irreducible unity of form and disclosed content that gives beauty its experiential force. In earlier works, I referred to this structure as the *Singular Rule*: the work of art both legislates and uniquely answers its own calling.<sup>3</sup>

If art transforms actuality into something meaningful rather than merely factual, it does so through a certain distance from immediate literalness. From this there emerges the necessity of what may be called *metaphorical distance*: that which enables art to present reality as beautiful and true rather than as a mere collection of blunt, literal facts. Such distance resists immediate transparency, repetition, and codified recognition, preserving instead the friction through which reality may become visible anew.

Nietzsche speaks of the terror that seizes human beings when they are deprived of the *metaphorical distance* provided by art and are left to confront life in purely literal terms:

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche traces the progressive devaluation of the *true world* through six stages, culminating in its abolition and the collapse of the distinction between the *real* and the *apparent* world.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the logic of the Singular Rule, see Avital and Dolanská (2019) and Avital (2007).

True knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action... Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence... Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. (Nietzsche, 1967, §7)

## 2. Freedom and Necessity

When Nietzsche speaks of the freedom to create our destiny out of contingencies as a work of art, he by no means envisions an unrestricted freedom detached from form, discipline, or norm. On the contrary, Nietzsche argues that precisely because no transcendental rules govern our existence from beyond the world, the Greeks grasped a fundamental truth: to create anything meaningful, one must submit to rigorous discipline within a clearly defined framework of form and norm. Art stands as the paramount example of this necessity. Although many artists and so-called ‘free’ thinkers of our era have objected to the arbitrariness and caprice of systems of law, Nietzsche maintains that:<sup>4</sup>

The curious fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness, whether in thought itself or in government, or in rhetoric and persuasion, in the arts just as in ethics, has developed only owing to the ‘tyranny of such capricious laws’; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ – and not that *laissez aller*. (Nietzsche, 1989, §188)

The values, norms, and rules within which we operate are, in a sense, arbitrary and contingent-constructed rather than grounded in any transcendental necessity or metaphysical determination. Yet this does not render them any less real. In rejecting any metaphysical justification of the world from beyond it, Nietzsche does not reject order as such, nor the normative as a constitutive dimension of reality.

Nietzsche’s point is that rules and norms are not abstractions imposed upon life from without; they exist in actuality, in the same space as human beings and their lives. The normative is always already immanent to the reality we inhabit. There is no passive encounter with ‘raw existence’ untouched by structuring, valuation, or affirmation. Thus, insofar as structures, rules, and norms are embedded in the reality we inhabit, they are not merely arbitrary or contingent; they are real and true.

The question therefore becomes: how can necessity arise within a world no longer grounded by transcendence? Nietzsche resolves the tension between the normative and the arbitrary that arises in the absence of any transcendental foundation through his metaphor of the *eternal recurrence* of the same. Most immediately, the *eternal recurrence* refers to a way of becoming one with one’s values such that one would will and enact them in precisely the same manner, in the same situation, across an infinity of lifetimes. When ‘repeated eternally’, things otherwise devoid of metaphysical or transcendental grounding acquire weight and emerge without the *mitigating circumstance of*

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche’s point being that genuine freedom and creativity are inseparable from discipline, constraint, and form.

*their transitory nature*. What is, in principle, arbitrary and contingent—namely, the choices we make, the actions we take, and the values we follow – ceases, in fact, to be arbitrary by being eternally the same.<sup>5</sup>

Thus any idea that ‘it could just as well have been otherwise’ loses its force, for the way things are becomes the only possible way. A ‘number of fortuities’ thus becomes necessity – contingency is transformed into destiny. Under eternal recurrence, every action we take is marked by a necessity inherent to it, not imposed upon it from an external metaphysical realm. Accordingly, all weight falls upon the present moment. Events unfold here and now in such a way that even past and future are gathered into the present – this, I think, is the true meaning of Nietzsche’s ‘eternity’.

To live life as art is to be at once legislating a standard of action within a given situation and enacting that standard in the very act itself – we create and carry out our values in one and the same gesture. When action is undertaken for its own sake, as an end in itself, and when we act as though our conduct were the only possible choice – one we would will repeat in precisely the same way forever – that conduct takes on the weight of necessity.

Here the structure of eternal recurrence logically echoes the singularity of the work of art itself. In a genuine artwork, the ‘what’ cannot be separated from the ‘how’: meaning becomes inseparable from the singular manner of its disclosure. Likewise, under the horizon of eternal recurrence, action can no longer derive its justification from anything external to itself; it must bear its necessity within the manner of its enactment. Just as a work of art achieves beauty when nothing within it can be altered without destroying its meaning, so too a life lived as art acquires necessity when action and value become internally inseparable. Eternal recurrence is therefore not mere repetition, but the transformation of contingency into necessity through the singular manner in which life is lived.

Hence what once appeared arbitrary or contingent assumes the character of destiny. Life is neither an arbitrary sketch nor something that seeks its justification beyond the world. It is art that grants life its gravity and meaning, disclosing reality in such a way that beauty itself becomes a source of meaning for our existence.

### 3. Plato and the End of Art?

According to Nietzsche, the Greek way of life as art – where beauty and truth were one – came to an end with Plato and his introduction of the ‘other world’. The aesthetic conception of the world, grounded in actuality, gave way to Plato’s metaphysics of truth and illusion, of high and low, of light and darkness. Against art, Plato introduced the concept of truth as something attainable only through reason. Art was to be banished from the ideal state for being *untrue* – a mere semblance, an illusion that leads one away from living in *truth*.

<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of *eternal recurrence* is introduced most dramatically in *The Gay Science* (§341 – *The Greatest Weight*), and elaborated throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche’s treatment of necessity and contingency in relation to art, see Nietzsche (1968, §§796–853).

While in Homer's *Odyssey* truth emerges through the presence of beauty – Odysseus' words possess such formal grace that he could not possibly lie – Socrates, Plato's teacher and the first 'rationalist', brought classical Greek tragedy to an end through reason and replaced art with philosophy.

In Greek tragedy, there was no distance between thought and action, truth and illusion: the Greeks embodied truth, while the enemy embodied falsehood. But in contrast, to follow Nietzsche's reading, Socrates, in introducing rationality, reflection, and relentless questioning, persuaded the Greeks that values were not identical with how they were lived – that goodness and truth did not necessarily coincide with beauty or aesthetic pleasure, and that ugliness was not in fact evil or inferior. From that point on, the good and the beautiful were to be constructed by reason rather than felt through instinct or experienced through the senses. Rationality was offered as a crutch once the certainties of life had been lost.

Yet Nietzsche's characterization of Plato remains partial. Once we turn to Plato's own writings, the relation between philosophy, truth, and art becomes considerably more complex. In fact, few thinkers in the history of philosophy have taken art as seriously as Plato. In the *Laws*, Plato addresses the tragedians – the *serious poets* – in the following terms: "Most honored guests, we're tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create" (Plato, 1997, 817b).<sup>6</sup> This statement might well have come from Nietzsche himself, reflecting on the Greek way of life as a work of art – a form of life governed by inner necessity. It can be argued here that Plato makes the point that when life itself is lived as art – when action embodies aesthetic necessity – there is no need for separate works of 'art' on top of that way of living.

What, then, is Plato's true attitude toward art? What underlies his fear in condemning the mimetic arts?

For Plato, art is essentially mimetic: it imitates what already exists. Yet the sensible world itself is only a copy of the Forms, and art becomes an imitation of an imitation – at a third remove from truth. Plato illustrates this through the image of the bed: the Form, the crafted object, and the painted image. While the craftsman is guided by knowledge, the artist imitates appearances. Confined to surface and sensory effect, mimetic art cannot engage reason; it appeals instead to the emotional parts of the soul, arousing passions without knowledge or measure, and thus, according to him, poses a dangerous challenge to the formation of the soul.<sup>7</sup>

The artist, in Plato's mimetic sense, reproduces things not as they are but as they appear, lacking knowledge of their true being. Remaining at the level of appearance, mimetic art cannot engage reason; it appeals instead to the

<sup>6</sup> Plato addresses the tragic poets directly, claiming that the legislators of the ideal city are themselves *tragedians* of the finest and truest kind – their city being the most beautiful and best tragedy.

<sup>7</sup> The three-tiered ontology of Form, particular, and image is illustrated through the example of the bed: God makes the Form, the craftsman makes the bed, and the painter makes an image of the bed – thereby standing at a third remove from truth (Plato, 1997, 596a–598d).

emotions, exploiting illusion and arousing passions without measure. In doing so, it weakens rational judgment, confuses seeming with being, and substitutes gesture for action. Mimetic art thus does not merely misrepresent reality; it disorders the soul and undermines the ethical conditions of genuine human action.<sup>8</sup>

Among such artists, Plato singles out the tragic poets – Homer foremost among them – as especially dangerous, precisely because they take ethics itself as their subject. The poet speaks of virtue, war, and politics without possessing knowledge of them. Like the painter who depicts a cobbler without knowing cobbling, the poet imitates the appearance of wisdom without grasping its substance. His art persuades those who judge by rhythm and charm rather than understanding.

Because the poet remains at a remove from truth, he mistakes what appears good for what is good, transmitting distorted values. The mimetic arts thus blur the distinction between seeming and being, strengthening the irrational parts of the soul while weakening its rational governance. In this way, poetry does not merely represent life; it shapes the character of those who encounter it.

Plato therefore presses a decisive question: if Homer truly possessed knowledge of virtue or politics, why did he not act upon it? Why did no city credit him with wise governance? The answer is revealing: the poet does not legislate from within action; he observes from without. He produces images of virtue but does not enact it. To say it bluntly, we, with Homer himself, may mistake Homer for Achilles, the hero of the Trojan War and the central protagonist of Homer's *Iliad*. It is hard to miss the relevance of this critique to our times; consider, for example, the central role actors play in our contemporary culture.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the mimetic artist parasitizes upon the achievements of those who genuinely act and know. He borrows the prestige of wisdom while lacking its substance. His art risks distorting virtue by presenting images detached from knowledge and responsibility. What is at stake is not merely aesthetic truth but the formation of ethical and political life itself.

This critique sounds uncannily resonant today, when the distinction between what is real and what is staged has grown fragile. Public life is saturated with rehearsed gestures and calculated performances. We inhabit a landscape in which imitation no longer follows reality – it replaces it.

#### 4. The Tragedy of Hamlet: the Dionysian Man

The tension Plato identified between appearance and action re-emerges with particular force in modern tragedy. Plato's concern that imitation might replace genuine action finds one of its most striking dramatic expressions in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

<sup>8</sup> Plato argues that mimetic poetry "waters and nourishes" the passionate part of the soul while "starving" the rational part, and that this disorder extends from poetry into life itself (Plato, 1997, 605c–606d).

<sup>9</sup> Plato presses this argument against Homer in particular, asking why, if Homer truly understood virtue and politics, no city credits him with wise legislation and no pupil of his became a great statesman (Plato, 1997, 598d–601b).

The Platonic opposition between imitators and true actors resurfaces with particular intensity in this tragedy. If Plato feared the confusion of appearance and being, Nietzsche finds in Hamlet the figure who experiences that confusion from within. Hamlet – Nietzsche’s paradigmatic ‘Dionysian man’ – embodies the tension between acting and merely performing, between shaping history and reflecting upon it.<sup>10</sup>

He is captivated by the power of actors to lend weight to words and substance to ideas—to make meaning appear real through performance. This fascination leads him to stage the play within the play, trusting that theater might reveal truth by holding ‘the mirror up to nature’. In this moment, Hamlet still believes that imitation can disclose reality.

Yet he soon confronts the danger Plato had identified: actors can simulate passion without living it, display emotion without responsibility, and substitute gesture for deed. The player who weeps for Hecuba lays bare this tension: emotion without cause, passion without involvement, appearance without being.<sup>11</sup>

Hamlet’s famous question – *to be, or not to be* – is a question of action: of whether one can still act after seeing through the illusions that sustain it. Having glimpsed the instability of appearances, Hamlet finds himself suspended above the world of action, unable fully to re-enter it. For, as Nietzsche observes, one cannot both see and act at the same time. Reflection displaces action; lucidity corrodes the will to act.

We have arrived here again at Nietzsche’s insight: knowledge, when it dissolves illusion, is paralyzing, for one cannot both see how values are constructed and still inhabit them with unreflective immediacy. From this position of detached awareness, the world loses its immediacy: love, justice, and beauty no longer compel but appear instead as objects of contemplation. Life itself becomes a spectacle.

In this sense, Hamlet embodies both Plato’s fear – that imitation corrupts action by replacing knowledge with appearance and doing with performing – and its tragic reversal, in which the opposite danger to which Nietzsche alludes emerges: that without ‘illusion’ action becomes impossible. Where Plato warned that imitation corrupts action, Hamlet reveals another danger: that knowledge itself can paralyze action. Unable to return to unreflective participation, yet unwilling to settle for empty performance, he oscillates between performance and action without being able to enact either. It is in this respect that Nietzsche renders knowledge itself tragic.

This tension finds its most striking expression in Hamlet’s own reaction to the player, whom he calls ‘monstrous’ for being able, in a mere fiction, to summon

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche describes Hamlet explicitly as the Dionysian man: “Both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things” (Nietzsche, 1967, §7).

<sup>11</sup> Hamlet’s response to the Player’s performance reads: “Is it not monstrous that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit [...] And all for nothing! / For Hecuba!” (Shakespeare, 1987, Act II, Scene 2).

genuine passion – *all for nothing* [...] *for Hecuba* – while he himself remains unable to act where action is required.

The tension revealed in Hamlet thus returns us to the question of the sense in which action – as it oscillates between illusion and knowledge – must ultimately recover a form in which meaning and action once again coincide.

## 5. Art and Emotional Monstrosity

Hamlet brings to light what he calls the ‘monstrous’ power of mimetic art: the capacity to produce genuine passion detached from action. What appears here as a disjunction between appearance and action returns us to Plato’s central anxiety about art: that, by appealing to what he calls the inferior part of the soul, mimetic art cultivates responses no longer anchored in action. Gesture is mistaken for deed, impression for essence. Mimetic art thus comes to operate according to a principle of maximum effect – the stronger the impact, the greater its apparent success – one of exaggeration rather than measure.

Yet this critique, while identifying a genuine danger, also brings into view a deeper question: if action cannot be sustained either by illusion alone or by knowledge alone, what then are its conditions? What Plato and Nietzsche ultimately share, I would argue, is the conviction that life must be lived as an art – not as the imitation of external models, but as the enactment of a standard that is both legislated and embodied from within.

This does not mean treating life as an object of aesthetic appreciation but forming action itself according to an inner necessity. An action guided in this way is not performed because it conforms to a model, nor because it produces a desired effect, but because it arises as necessary within the act and could not be otherwise. To live in this way is to allow conduct to be shaped from within. The beauty of action – the manner in which something is done – thus becomes the measure by which it is judged: not an addition to action, but the form in which its truth and rightness are realized.

In this sense, what Plato feared in art and what Nietzsche affirmed in it converge: not imitation, but the formation of action itself.

What appears in Hamlet as a tragic psychological condition becomes, in modernity, an aesthetic condition. From this perspective, Plato’s critique of mimetic art can be understood as an early recognition of a phenomenon that, in modern terms, might be called kitsch: the production of intensified emotional effect and the appearance of beauty detached from truth and action. That such a term can be retrospectively applied underscores the acuity of Plato’s insight into how emotion may be exploited under the guise of art. This danger finds its most complete expression in modernity, in the form of kitsch as a dominant aesthetic mode.<sup>12</sup>

Kitsch is the denial of art, since it represents a failure to interact with reality in a way that would be valuable to our lives. Kitsch does not contribute to our

<sup>12</sup> Kulka (1996) defines kitsch as works that: (i) depict objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions, (ii) are instantly and effortlessly identifiable, and (iii) do not substantially enrich the associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

understanding of the world; it fails to disclose reality in a way that would be beautiful or meaningful. Kitsch knows nothing of the 'metaphorical distance' essential to art as a mode of engaging with reality in a direct and brave, yet moderately detached, way. Kitsch appeals to values agreed upon in advance, preventing us from dealing with our existence in the world freely, meaningfully, and afresh. It promotes sentimentality instead of discipline and cultivates impotence when it comes to action. Kitsch exists for its own sake, revealing nothing about the world or our life within it. It covers things up rather than opening them up for us.

The emotional appeal of kitsch – already evident in the intensity of Plato's apprehension toward it – is nonetheless extremely powerful. Part of this appeal lies in the complete predictability of kitsch and of our response to it. Kitsch offers certainty: we know exactly what we are going to get. Everything about it is explicit, immediately recognizable, and resistant to ambiguity. It excludes novelty – anything unexpected, vague, or unpredictable. We know what we ought to think and feel even before the encounter.

Kitsch guarantees that our experience is shared, that it is the same for all of us – we can be certain that we are all talking about the same thing. It embodies what is most 'typical', most 'appropriate', most 'representative', and most 'characteristic'. Kitsch presents the appearance of truth in advance, thereby offering comfort and safety. In kitsch, nothing is left out and nothing is added; everything is clear and simple. With kitsch, we take no risks.

Here again we witness the collapse of 'metaphorical distance'. In genuine art, the work does not merely reproduce already established conventions of representation but opens a singular path toward its object. The observer must traverse a certain distance – interpretive, perceptual, existential – through which reality becomes newly disclosed. Kitsch, by contrast, collapses this distance into nullity. It replaces discovery with immediate recognizability and substitutes repetition for revelation. The result is not truth disclosed anew, but the frictionless confirmation of what is already culturally codified and socially affirmed as reality itself.

It is precisely this political dimension of kitsch that brings Plato's critique into direct dialogue with modernity and contemporary art. What most concerned Plato was not merely art's aesthetic failure, but its capacity to function politically – to reassure its audience of who they are through what might be called a form of moral flattery, while quietly rendering them susceptible to direction.

As Arnold Hauser observes, kitsch, marked by its intrinsic mediocrity, operates as a 'pseudo' or 'parasitic' art whose primary function is to soothe, flatter, and reassure its consumers.<sup>13</sup> By appealing to cultivated sentimental tastes, and by offering objects of admiration that echo and celebrate the

<sup>13</sup> Hauser's (1962) analysis of kitsch as a product of industrialization and the market for mass culture remains one of the most incisive sociological treatments of the phenomenon.

aesthetics of the prevailing order, kitsch becomes, as Clement Greenberg argued, a powerful political instrument of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Modern Art – The Emergence of Visual Truth

Kitsch belongs to modernity not only as a term, but as a fully developed phenomenon. It comes into being wherever art is reduced to effect, repetition, and reassurance. As Georges Bataille observes in his reflections on the nineteenth-century Salon, one encounters there an endless proliferation of works that are dull and hopelessly conventional, offering saccharine evocations of inherited themes.<sup>15</sup>

What defines such production is not merely its lack of originality, but its insistence on being taken seriously as art. Kitsch does not demand a virtue; it congratulates the viewer for already possessing it. Its impact remains at the level of recognition: it recalls great works, deep emotions, and elevated sentiments, without ever embodying them.

From this perspective, the emergence of modern art can be understood as a response to the reduction of art to repetition and effect – that is, to the conditions that define kitsch. With Édouard Manet and, subsequently, the Impressionists, art turns away from formula and toward the demand for truth – not grounded in a metaphysical order or in the authority of the past, but in the immediacy of lived reality. Standards and values cease to exist as external norms and instead take shape within the work itself.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, aesthetic sensibility and necessity converge; what had previously appeared as a transcendental standard reappears within the work itself as an immanent necessity. Modern art thus does not abandon the question of truth; it relocates it. Truth is no longer given in advance but must be formed within the act itself.

It is precisely for this reason that a moment of ‘metaphorical distance’ remains essential to art. Modernist art ‘flatness’ expresses the withdrawal of any given depth or metaphysical beyond: the work no longer invites the viewer to look through it toward a pre-existing order, but presents itself as a self-contained field in which meaning must emerge. Yet precisely because transcendence is no longer given, it must be reconstituted within the work itself.

This sheds new light on what Walter Benjamin described as the *aura* of the artwork in his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. A work of art offers an experience marked by a moment of symbolic – or metaphorical – distance, as already introduced in the discussion

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg’s (1939, pp. 34–49) seminal essay argues that kitsch is the rear-guard product of industrial capitalism, exploiting the genuine cultural needs that avant-garde art addresses. His account of kitsch as vicarious experience and faked sensations has remained foundational for subsequent discussions of the phenomenon.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Bataille’s reflections on the academic Salon are developed across several texts, especially in *Manet* (Geneva: Skira, 1955), where he contrasts the transgressive immediacy of Manet’s painting with the complacent conventions of the official Salon tradition.

<sup>16</sup> On Manet’s role in the emergence of modernism, see T. J. Clark (1984). Clark’s account of how Manet’s paintings disrupted established conventions of representation and judgment is particularly pertinent here.

of Plato and later inverted by Nietzsche: it raises questions, suggests meanings, and alludes to something that exceeds its literal form. It promises something other than itself – something not immediately present, yet toward which the viewer is drawn. This problem becomes decisive once art no longer merely risks mediation through reproduction, but becomes structurally dependent upon institutional mediation itself.

What is at stake here, however, is not simply the disappearance of originality in the traditional sense, but the erosion of the metaphorical distance through which the work interrupts habitual perception and reorients experience.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, Baudelaire's insight that modernity consists in the fleeting and the contingent, whose artistic task is to capture within it something eternal, expresses the paradox at the heart of modern art: art holds together what passes and what endures.<sup>18</sup>

### 7. Arthur Danto and the Attack on Beauty

Modernism's progressive withdrawal from beauty – initially undertaken as part of a broader rethinking of inherited values and forms – culminates, in its late development, in a decisive break: beauty comes to be regarded not merely as unnecessary, but as philosophically suspect. This position finds its most articulate formulation in Arthur Danto, whose account of the *end of art* reflects a moment in which art, having freed itself from all stylistic and historical constraints, no longer requires aesthetic criteria to be defined as art – aesthetic properties may persist, but they are no longer constitutive of what makes something art (Danto, 1997, p. 197).<sup>19</sup>

This withdrawal was not without historical justification. Modern and conceptual art often emerged as emancipatory movements directed against rigid academic conventions, inherited hierarchies, and exhausted aesthetic formulas. The problem arises, however, when liberation from fixed criteria culminates in the disappearance of any constitutive relation between the work, beauty, and lived experience.

In such a condition, beauty is displaced from its constitutive role and treated as an optional, even misleading attribute – something that risks obscuring the conceptual nature of the work. At times, this suspicion takes on a distinctly moral tone, as though beauty itself were complicit in illusion, seduction, or superficiality. What emerges, then, is not merely a neutral reclassification of aesthetic values, but a structural shift: the separation of meaning from immediate appearance, and with it the growing dependence of art on interpretative mediation.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin's ([1935] 1968, pp. 217–251) concept of the *aura* – defined as *the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close the original may be* – remains one of the most influential frameworks for thinking about authenticity and reproducibility in art. For the relation between Benjamin's *aura* and the concept of singular necessity developed here, see Avital and Dolanská (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Baudelaire (1964, p. 13) defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” – one half of art whose other half remains “the eternal and the immutable.”

<sup>19</sup> For Danto's broader account of the *end of art*, see also Danto (1981).

The disappearance of beauty as a constitutive element of the work does not leave art in a state of neutral freedom; rather, it produces a vacuum. In this intellectual climate, it is no surprise that Danto undermines the very physicality of the work of art, as in his well-known claim that “with the philosophical coming of age of art, visibility drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been” (Danto, 1997, p. 16).

Under such post-historical conditions, the work increasingly depends on institutional frameworks of interpretation in order to secure meaning. The danger here is not merely the displacement of beauty, but the erosion of the metaphorical distance through which art discloses reality anew. As the work becomes increasingly subordinated to institutional explanation, the tension between appearance and meaning begins to collapse.

Where meaning is no longer anchored in the immediate presence of the work – no longer secured by the necessity that beauty once expressed – it must be supplied from elsewhere. Interpretation no longer emerges from the encounter between the work and the beholder, but is increasingly mediated, stabilized, and authorized in advance. It is at this point that institutions – museums, academies, curatorial and critical discourses – assume a decisive role, not merely in presenting art, but in determining what counts as art and what counts as meaning.

The work of art thus enters a phase that we may best label as a ‘bureaucracy of meaning’. In the absence of an internal criterion – of a necessity that would be legible in the work itself – meaning must be administered. Contemporary artists, in order to be recognized within this system, risk becoming its functionaries: producing works that are already aligned with the interpretative frameworks through which they will be validated. What is exhibited and circulated is not simply what is made, but what can be rendered intelligible in advance.

In this way, the work no longer challenges the conditions of its reception; it confirms them. The space of judgment is thereby narrowed, as the encounter with the work is pre-structured by the very apparatus that claims to interpret it. What disappears in this process is the possibility that meaning might arise unmediated – from the work itself – as an event rather than an assignment.

## 8. Institutional Mediation and the Loss of Immediacy

This condition has been described from within the art world itself with particular clarity by Dave Hickey. What he identifies is not simply a change in taste, but a structural transformation: the emergence of an administrative system that mediates between the work and its audience, regulating not only interpretation but access. In this system, the encounter with the work is no longer immediate; it is pre-structured by institutional discourse (Hickey, 2009).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hickey’s comparison of the contemporary art institution to the Church – both mediating access to images and regulating the terms of their reception – is developed in the title essay, *Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty* (Hickey, 2009).

Hickey's comparison to the Church is instructive. Just as the priest once stood between the believer and the sacred image, guiding and controlling the terms of access, so contemporary institutions stand between the viewer and the work. The route from image to beholder is no longer direct but passes through an apparatus that authorizes meaning in advance. Hickey describes from within contemporary art practice what Danto's philosophy makes structurally possible.

What is at stake in this mediation is precisely the place of beauty. For beauty, as we have seen, depends on a certain immediacy – a capacity of the work to address the beholder without prior authorization. It introduces a relation that cannot be fully regulated, one that escapes fixed interpretative frameworks. It is for this reason that beauty becomes suspect: not because it is superficial, but because it bypasses the structures that seek to govern meaning.

### 9. Beauty as Counterforce

What is denied in this arrangement is not simply pleasure, but judgment. Beauty is excluded because it enables a form of judgment that does not depend on institutional validation. It opens a space in which the work can be encountered directly, and in doing so, it threatens the monopoly on meaning exercised by the system.

Beauty thus stands as a counterforce to the bureaucratization of art. By reaching the beholder without mediation, it reintroduces the possibility of a direct encounter with meaning – one that cannot be reduced to discourse, managed by authority, or exhausted by explanation. It interrupts the closed circuit in which the work merely confirms the system that sustains it.

In this sense, beauty is not an escape from politics, but a condition of resistance. It disrupts the established language through which reality is administered and reopens the possibility of seeing – and judging – anew.

### 10. Beauty as Singular Legislation

If beauty resists institutional mediation, it is because it cannot be reduced to rules and norms applied from outside. A work of art does not become meaningful by conforming to pre-established criteria; it becomes meaningful by establishing its own necessity. In this sense, a genuine artwork is not an application of a rule, but the moment in which a rule is formed. It is at once the posing of a problem and its resolution. The preceding tensions – between action and imitation, immediacy and mediation, contingency and necessity – converge in the question of how meaning is legislated within the work itself.

It is for this reason that a work of art is and must be singular. To call something singular is not merely to say that it is particular – one instance among others – but that it answers only to itself. It does not derive its validity from belonging to a class or satisfying a definition. Rather, it establishes, in its very constitution, the standard by which it is to be judged. The work is both the law and its instantiation, the criterion as well as its fulfillment.

Beauty is the name we give to this coincidence of freedom and necessity. A work appears beautiful when it no longer seems contingent, when it impresses itself upon us as if it could not have been otherwise. What is experienced here is not conformity to a prior rule, but the emergence of necessity within the act itself. Beauty does not follow from correctness; it reveals it.

This is why beauty cannot be fixed in advance, nor reduced to a formula. Any attempt to codify beauty transforms it into convention, and therefore into something repeatable. But what is repeatable belongs to the domain of the general, whereas beauty belongs to the singular. It must be rediscovered each time, in each new work, as the successful formation of a relation between what is given and what must be made.

In this sense, art stands in a deep affinity with ethics. A genuine ethical situation, like a genuine artistic problem, cannot be resolved by the mechanical application of inherited rules. It is singular. Competing values press upon the agent at once, and no pre-established answer can determine the course of action in advance. To act is therefore to legislate: to redefine, within the situation itself, what counts as right, true, or just. Only in retrospect can such an action appear necessary.

This is the point at which Kant's insight converges with Nietzsche's. For Kant, a work of art is that which gives the rule to itself; for Nietzsche, in the absence of transcendental guarantees, life itself must be lived as a work of art. In both cases, what is at stake is the same structure: the emergence of a standard from within the act, rather than its imposition from without (Kant, 1952, §46).<sup>21</sup>

Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a further clarification. Rules do not function as fixed prescriptions determining their own application in advance; they are extended, reinterpreted, and brought to life in use. A rule is not a 'railroad to infinity', but something that acquires meaning only in its enactment. Art makes this visible. In the work of art, a rule is not followed – it is reinvented (Wittgenstein, 1953, §218).<sup>22</sup>

This is why beauty cannot be separated from truth. When a work achieves this singular necessity, we do not experience it as one possibility among others, but as the only possible resolution of the problem it sets. We feel that it could not have been otherwise. It is in this sense that beauty becomes the criterion of truth – not as an external measure, but as the internal coherence of what has been brought into being.

In the contemporary condition, where meaning is increasingly mediated, administered, and stabilized by institutional frameworks, this dimension of singular legislation is precisely what is at risk. What is threatened is not simply

<sup>21</sup> Kant defines genius as "the innate mental aptitude (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant, 1952, §46, p. 168). The singularity of the artwork, on the Kantian account, consists precisely in this: the rule it gives cannot be derived from any prior formula but must instead emerge from the work itself.

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein's image of the 'railroad to infinity' criticizes the mistaken assumption that rules determine their own application in advance. For an application of this insight to the philosophy of art, see Avital (2007, pp. 20–37).

taste, but the capacity of art to establish meaning from within. Beauty appears here not as an ornament, but as resistance: the point at which the work escapes repetition, exceeds its conditions, and reopens the possibility of truth.

It is here that the significance of beauty extends beyond art itself. For what is at stake in the experience of art is not merely aesthetic judgment, but the very condition under which meaning can emerge in life.

Beauty is something we cannot capture and own; yet we cannot live meaningfully without it. It cannot be calculated or predicted, and yet it guides our lives as an ethical measure. It is a place where we cannot lie – for the beauty of things, or the lack of it, reveals whether they are true or false, and the grace of a conduct or a deed shows whether it is right or wrong.

It is worth emphasizing once more that the reintroduction of beauty therefore does not imply a return to rigid aesthetic norms or fixed hierarchies of representation. On the contrary, beauty is defended here precisely as that which resists codification, repetition, and administered perception. Its task is not to close meaning, but to reopen the possibility of a singular encounter with reality.

Art, as the legislator of beauty, stands as a counterforce to both the abstractions of modern rationality and the pressures of practical life. It preserves the possibility that something irreducibly singular may emerge beyond repetition and system. In this sense, art does not merely represent life; it makes life meaningful by preserving its irreducible uniqueness.

Art remains emancipatory precisely in this sense. Because the singular relation between the ‘what’ of the work and the ‘how’ of its disclosure cannot be prescribed in advance, meaning itself cannot be fully reduced to external formulas or administered interpretations. Art demands participation in the formation of meaning. To live life as art is therefore not to submit to a fixed ideal of beauty, but to assume responsibility for shaping meaning and value from within the singular conditions of existence.

We are thus brought back to the beginning: to the Greek intuition that life is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. But this justification is never given once and for all. It must be enacted, rediscovered, and legislated anew time and again.

As T. S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
(Eliot, 1943, Part V)

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