In favor of beauty

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Abstract

At the beginning of a new century an old question has to be asked: are the aesthetic category of the Beautiful and the works of art which promote this classical category really obsolete? Many voices, like the literary critic Sianne Ngai, state that in a new era postmodern categories such as – Zany, Cute, Interesting – are needed. The mighty Kitsch itself is defined by Matei Călinescu as one of the very faces of modernity. Other voices, such as the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton and the modernist art critic Robert Hughes talk about the ageless feature of Beauty that lies in the very structure of the human senses and mind. At the beginning of a new millennium Hughes even dares to state that the aesthetic experience is still at the very heart of art.

This article will analyze several opinions of contemporary thinkers about Beauty and will argue that Beauty is still needed today and still present in contemporary works. Furthermore, this article will claim that the pursuit of Beauty must not to be related only with traditional media as painting and drawing, like conservative art critics and thinkers do, but also with new media such as installation, photography or cinematography.

Keywords: Beauty, modern art, aesthetic experience, new media.

One of the key questions of contemporary aesthetics is whether it is still possible to speak about beauty after more than a half century of conceptualism and countless concessions to the mighty kitsch? Is there any need for the work of art to be beautiful in the society of spectacle (Debord 1994) where everything is to be bought and sold, where life is more about having and appearing then being, where the work of art itself turns into a banal commodity? Today any artist is aware that the classical concepts of genius and contemplation are somehow out of place. Beauty also seems to be a word that dropped out of fashion. The citizen of the spectacle society has no time for contemplation and no consideration for an art without firm market value, for artists with no credits by established art institutions.

At the same time many artists and critical theorists, who aim for a strict segregation between the Artworld and the commodity market, also reject the beautiful and the aesthetic form: it is safer to drop out the aesthetic form, the

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exponent of the ancient bourgeois culture. Anti-art and the rejection of the beautiful and its *aura* seem to be more compatible with a cultural revolution.\(^4\)

But after all these mutations and abdications artists, spectators, art critics and philosophers together start to wonder what is the new meaning and scope of art, if any? What can art be without the aesthetic form?

In his book *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Herbert Marcuse, a founding member of the Frankfurt School along with Theodore Adorno, provides a lucid and objective analysis of the relation between art and revolution. The art promises resistance to societal repression but there is no need to drop out the aesthetic form in order to develop a cultural revolution. The affinity between art and revolution is an inner and subtle kinship.

Marcuse criticizes the obstinate politicization of art done by the radical Marxist aesthetics. Taking for granted the assumption that the aesthetic form is a factor of stabilization in repressive societies, helping to justify and beautify an established order, these theories generalize the denial of classical form to all possible styles and aesthetic forms. This is the way the radicals strain to develop an Anti-art, to “find forms of communication that may break the oppressive rule of the established language and images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (Marcuse 1972, 79). The new goals of the revolution require a nonconformist language, they say. “The subverting use of the artistic tradition aims from the beginning at a systematic desublimation of culture: that is to say, at undoing the aesthetic form.” (81).

Marcuse defines the aesthetic form as “the total of qualities (harmony, rhythm, contrast) which make an oeuvre a self-contained whole, with a structure and order of its own (the style)” (81). By means of these qualities the dominant order of the reality can be transcended and transformed. It is a fact that the transformation implied is not a real and effective one. The universe of art contradicts the reality. The contradiction is methodical and intentional but also sublimated. The realm of the aesthetic form is the domain of the idealist *illusion*. This is how Marxist aesthetics aim at disintegrating bourgeois culture altogether – operational values (the father figure as head of the family and the enterprise, the authoritarian education, the instrumentalist reason) and higher intellectual culture as well.

At the end of the 60’s – the decade of the open and free forms, when void score performances as “4′33″” by John Cage, null paintings as Rauschenberg’s “White Paintings” and unexposed films like “Zen for Film” by Nam June Paik did not shock anybody anymore, the break with bourgeois culture seemed complete. The whole universe of fine art had been diminishes as a piece of

\(^3\) In his seminal essay entitled *The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin defines the *aura* as the *here and now* of the authentic, original and unique work of art.

\(^4\) I am not referring here to any particular movement like the Chinese Cultural Revolution but to a potential one.
ancient history. The historical function of art had been reversed. But did these
efforts really subvert what they were supposed to subvert, were they really steps
on the road to liberation?

However, it is important to realize that, in fact, the *idealist intellectual
culture* devaluated and even negated the *operational values* of the bourgeois
material culture from the very beginning. Marcuse took note that all the so called
*bourgeois œuvres*, at least since the 19th century, firmly dissociate themselves
“from the world of commodities, from the brutality of bourgeois industry and
commerce, from the distortion of human relationships, from capitalist materialism,
from instrumentalist reason.” (86). Thus the definition of art lays in the very
negation of reality, this negation subsisting in the very *form* of the work of art. In
conclusion, in Marcuse’s view, without this inner dialectic between affirmation
and negation, without specific aesthetic tension between the established order and
the other reality that celebrates the universal humanity, the beauty of the soul, the
inner freedom, we can’t talk about art at all.

The aesthetic form is nothing but an equivalent concept for what Kant
coined as the *beautiful* in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, referring to the
universal, disinterested, both sensuous and intellectual pleasure that every subject
of knowledge can experience. This pleasure, that only the human subject can feel
when he is confronted with the beautiful form of a flower, a tree or an work of art,
can and has to be distinguished from the interested, sensuous pleasure of the
*agreeable* (for example the pleasure of a nice meal that even an animal could
appreciate) and also from the interested (in the existence of an object or an action),
rational satisfaction of the *good*.

The fact that the *beautiful* and the aesthetic pleasure correspond to certain
universal qualities of the human intellect, sensibility and imagination, certifies the
aspiration of the *judgment of taste* to objectivity and necessity and can also
provide a strong base for a definition of the human being. Giving up the beautiful
will nevertheless signify giving up the very concept of the human as a rational
being that can transcend the material world of appearances (*phenomena*,
representation) and reach his *noumenal* side, his liberty. The objectiveness and the
universal quality of the beautiful alongside the capacity to transform a particular,
individual content into a higher, universal order of which the individual partakes,
thus guarantee a firm universal validity to the realm of art.

Therefore, confronted with the age-old question, the aesthetic theory is able
to declare: the Greek tragedy, the medieval epic, the 19th century painting and
literature are still true and also enjoyable today. Authentic art reveals facts and
possibilities of the human existence: the tragic universe where man is confronted
with his ontological limit, the quest for secular redemption. Although the aesthetic
universe puts forward an illusion, in that very illusion another reality shows forth,
that of possible liberation. By invoking this promise art transcends all particular
class content. Even though the bourgeois himself, his specific problems and décor
are part of the 19th century work of art’s content, Marcuse argues that this content “becomes transparent as the condition and as the dream of humanity: conflict and reconciliation between man and man, man and nature – the miracle of the aesthetic form:” (90). Certainly the intellectual bourgeois culture is an elitist culture but this character, in Marcuse’s view, is the very character of culture since antiquity. Thus if a cultural revolution aims to extinct the elitist character of the bourgeois culture it has to go far beyond against the aesthetic form itself, against the art as such, against the literature as literature.

At the end of the 20th century the concept of a cultural revolution is for Marcuse nothing but an abstract negation. Not carried by a revolutionary class, on one hand “it tries to give word, image, and tone to the feelings and needs of the masses (which are not revolutionary)” (93) and on the other hand it creates anti-forms by means of fragmentation and montage techniques applied on the traditional forms. After a hundred years of anti-forms and conceptualism, at a half century since Pop Art has opened the Pandora box of the kitsch and serial reproduction we can ask if there really is such a thing as art for/of the masses?

Walter Benjamin himself, in the very essay in which he talks about the politicization of art by means of the new technical expressions of film and photography, admits that the public of the film “is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (Benjamin 1968, 241). The problem is the same confrontation between the masses’ desire for distraction and the art, which reclaims concentration from the spectators. “Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. […] In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings.” (241). Architecture is the most ancient art form that outlived Greek tragedy, the epic poem and who will maybe outlive painting too. In Benjamin’s view this is because the reception of architecture is not optical but tactile. “On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit.” (240). Benjamin states that the modern, industrialized era needs a new mechanism of perception, a technical one, and this kind of perception couldn’t be performed only by means of optical side (visual perception) and contemplation. Tactile appropriation and habit are needed. He concludes that film, with its shock effect and its own method of reception in the state of distraction, is the only one capable to mobilize the masses.

But we have to ask: is the artistic feature of a building the one that people perceive by habit? And furthermore is art compatible with entertainment and distraction? Arthur Schopenhauer strained to explain in The World as Will and Representation why the visitors of a foreign city are the only ones who can reach

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5 Kitsch in the words of Matei Călinescu has an aesthetic and also an ethic feature, it can be opposed to the good taste as bad taste and also to the truth as false art, mimesis, counterfeit art.
the true beauty of the place – habit kills the aesthetic value and the capacity of contemplation. We can accept that film is the new technique suited for the 20th century. But we have to be very careful not to reduce art and aesthetic value to the plain language or medium suited for a certain art paradigm. The medium or technique is not able to guarantee beauty by itself. Of all the oil paintings done in the Baroque period only a few are stated as beautiful. Of all the buildings we appropriate today by habit most are just ugly and functional.

Moreover if we accept the relation between art and the masses’ desire for distraction and entertainment we have to drop out the very definition of beautiful, the one Kant taught us in order to help us discern between the beautiful (the human characteristic intellectual and sensuous pleasure) and the agreeable, the pleasure which the human subject shares with the animal. This approach was the one that in fact opened the Pandora’s Box of kitsch and commercial music and films. To ignore the aesthetic value means to reduce art at a popular and suitable technique at the disposal of a capitalist system. The first and most serious effect was to emphasize the commodity value of the so called work of art. In his 1972 book Marcuse reveals that the dominant class of the late 20th century had ceased to practice the aesthetic culture and was not interested in any culture. In the globalization era it is not a cultural Marxist revolution that has determined the fade of beauty and the disintegration of the aesthetic culture, instead, these shifts are due to “the work of the internal dynamic of contemporary capitalism and the adjustment of culture to the requirements of contemporary capitalism.” (Marcuse 1972, 85).

This article is not implying here that Benjamin was not right to identify film and photography as the most significant artistic languages of the new technical era. But the difference between plain language or medium and the aesthetic use of a medium has to be underlined once more. Today we can very clearly see the huge difference between the film as art and the film as industry, or in the words of the great French director Robert Bresson, the difference between cinematography (the art of cinema) and cinema. In an interview taken by Jean-Luc Godard, after the 1966 premiere of “Au hasard Balthazar”, Bresson explains: the film as art is about the human soul and its innermost depths, about interiorization, intimacy, isolation.

In the films of established great directors, authors, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky (the director who defined the art of film as Sculpting in time) or even in more recent films made by Theodoros Angelopoulos or Chantal Akerman, we can access a true form of beauty and can experience contemplation. Even if at the same time, with different authors, we can identify the very film aesthetics based upon

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6 See the Author Theory of the Nouvelle Vague artists and critics: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard etc.
shock and montage predicted by Benjamin, one cannot state anymore that film has to be connected only with shock or the *agreeable* pleasure of the masses.

Today we can understand the personal urge that determined a romantic semitical character like Benjamin to convert to Marxism and give up the aesthetic form. In 1936, four years before committing suicide while he was chased by Nazi troops, Benjamin feared that aesthetics was directly linked to German spirit and fascism. In this context his only concern could have been that his new theses about the *era of mechanical reproduction* will become effective weapons. An inevitable side effect has been accepted alongside: the theses will “brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense.” (Benjamin 1968, 241).

Thirty years after, the great film director Robert Bresson will contradict Benjamin: *We must preserve the mystery.* *Life is mysterious, and we should see that on screen.* Moreover, members of the Frankfurt school – both Theodor Adorno, the disciple of Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse – reject the abdication of the aesthetic form. Talking about the reemergence of form Marcuse stated: “And with it we find a new expression of the inherently subversive qualities of the aesthetic dimension, especially beauty as the sensuous appearance of the idea of freedom.” (Marcuse 1972, 117). Beauty returns and with it the very soul of the art returns, and here Marcuse stresses that the beauty implied is not the one in food and commercials but the old and repressed one, the one capable to hold a subversive content. He is obviously not talking about the banal revival of classicism, romanticism or any traditional form. He refers to the contemporary art paradigm. Accepting the premises of Marcuse that revolution is the very substance of art we are able to find beauty in the 70’s in a simple poem of Brecht (but not in a radical political play) or in the music of Bob Dylan.

Marcuse provides a general and operational definition of beauty: “Beauty as a quality which is in an opera of Verdi as well as in a Bob Dylan song, in a painting of Ingres as well as Picasso, in a phrase of Flaubert as well as James Joyce, in a gesture of the Duchess of Guermantes as well as of a hippie girl! Common to all of them is the expression of beauty as negation of the commodity world and of the performances, attitudes, looks, gestures, required by it.” (121). In this case the well known *Death of Art* will be possible only when humans will not be able to distinguish between true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly. This perfect barbarism at the height of civilization is similar with Vilem Flusser’s idea of Post-History and deliberate illiteracy. In conclusion, the dissolution of the aesthetic form means the dissolution of art itself.

Furthermore, there are recent opinions that plead for the universal human need for art and beauty. One belongs to the art critic Robert Hughes, the author of the well known book and BBC TV series *The shock of the new* (1980), a classical work consisting of eight essays about eight separate subjects important
to an understanding of modernity. Starting from *The mechanical paradise* to *The landscape of pleasure* and *The future that was*, Robert Hughes discusses key problems of modern art such as: the myth of the Future in the machine age at the start of the 20th century, the loss of the newness in late modernism, how has art created images of political propaganda, what has been the relation of art to pleasure, to the irrational and the unconscious and what changes were forced on art by the pressure of mass media. At that time Hughes, as any progressist critic, was very fond of Television (he valued the great virtue of TV to communicate enthusiasm), art democratization and the use of art works reproductions. His films and book were rooted though in the traditional concept of aesthetic pleasure. In 2004, 25 years after he made *The shock of the new*, Hughes added another chapter, this time a more conservative and critical view of the 20th century art, entitled *The new shock of the new*. 

This new chapter proposes a meditation on the very concept of novelty in contemporary visual art, an inquiry on the difference between *just another piece of art* and a work that really has something fresh and vital to say. At the beginning of the century the Eiffel tower, a symbol of the energy and self confidence of the modern man, attracted a mass audience and left millions of people touched by the feeling of the new age. But do the art works of today have the same power and impact? In Hughes’ opinion Guernica of Picasso was one of the last works of strong political meaning. Contemporary art has lost its interest and power to depict and criticize reality (and here Hughes agrees with Marcuse in valuing the subversive power of art and intellectual culture).

A possible comment to this statement can be done starting from the hypothesis formulated by Benjamin: photography and cinematography has taken the place of modern painting. What if contemporary painting really lost the mass impact that cinematography holds in turn. Hence strong political meaning is present mainly in documentary films and, in a smaller percent, in artistic cinematography as Benjamin had predicted. Maybe the works of the Italian neo-realists have depicted the World War Two events and the years that followed better than any other medium could have done it. We can invoke the same argument about the New Wave Romanian cinema and the communist period or the 90’s.

7 We must underline that in this case we have a different way of perceiving the architecture than Benjamin has had. Hughes investigates the very concept of aesthetic pleasure and the optical reception and not the habit like Benjamin has done in *The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction*.

8 The same painting is mentioned by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Like any other authentic art work, Guernica posses in Adorno’s view a non-ideological character, so it is able to speak by means of its power of visual expression only like a visceral wound of society does. This is the source of its strong character of social protest.

9 Speaking of Romanian art in the communist period I don’t want to argue that the Realist Socialist painting or the underground Performance Art of artists like Ion Grigorescu or Geta Bratescu had no political impact. But Realist Socialist painting although has had a mass audience
take into consideration the possibility that visual contemporary art (painting, installation, performance) is not able to change anymore the way a large number of people think and feel about power, like Guernica and other modernist works did.

This fact could be related with the very definition of the artist: the visual artist of today is not interested in the world anymore but only in his personal phobias, said Hughes having Jeff Koons’ and Damian Hirst’s works in mind. These artists’ only egocentric goal is to make a powerful and immediate impact, to stay out of the crowd no matter what, to assure the public that they are different. Hence contemporary shows present only fast, gettable and cynical images like mass media do.

The pact of high art with the kitsch and commercial values was signed first by Andy Warhol, the artist who tried to redefine art as business, using as his primary model the Fashion industry. Hughes invokes Warhol’s obsession for the bright colors of TV and the process of serialization: two Elvises are better than one, the cans of soup are depicted on a canvas exactly as if they were standing on the shelf of a supermarket.

Defining kitsch as a typical feature of modernity, as one of the very faces of modernity Matei Călinescu has taken into consideration the infiltration of the kitsch in high art’s territory. He mentioned the camp sensibility - contemporary art form that emerged in the 60’s in New York, first in some queer artistic communities.

Camp art uses the category of kitsch for its ironic potential. It plays with bad taste, usually the bad taste of yesterday, presenting it as a high form of refinement. The mechanism is simple: once it is accepted and assumed, kitsch becomes its very absolute negation. A succinct description is provided by Susan Sontag: “It is beautiful because it is awful.” (Sontag 1969, 2963).

In a way Pop Art and Camp provide an interesting research of the inner mechanism of commodity in a capitalist society. In Marcuse’s view, though, the very tension between operational values and intellectual high culture is lost. “I want to be a machine” Warhol, the artist who called his own studio The Factory, proclaimed. It is a fact that the Camp artist did not fight anymore against the repressive capitalist society but tried to become a direct mirror of the commodity itself alongside with its rules, its mechanics. The fight, the tension are replaced by a relaxed and vague irony.

Matei Călinescu quoted the art critic Hilton Kramer (Kramer 1974, 19), the one who coined the name The Flea Market School for the Camp group coagulated by Warhol: today any remains of bad taste, buried in the past, are ready for exhumation. Hughes seems to share this opinion when calling Warhol and the Gilbert and George duo image scavengers and recyclers. The danger of

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Camp sensibility consists in the fact that between kitsch and Camp there is just a very thin line of demarcation; looking from the outside and in the eyes of a neophyte public the two are identical.

Jeff Koons\(^{11}\) is considered by Hughes the true follower of Warhol’s kitschy manner and in the same time the heir of Duchamp’s legacy of the readymade. From his first exhibitions consisting of consumer items (basketballs, vacuum cleaners) shown in Plexiglas boxes to the huge porcelain statue of Michael Jackson and his chimpanzee, and the controversial paintings and sculptures *Made in Heaven*, Koons shocks and at the same time pleases the consumerist public. The use of pornographic and advertising images has helped him to become a VIP, a star. Thus the contemporary artist is no longer a clear eye, a contemplative genius but one of the media stars described by Debord as: “spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles” (Debord 1994, 58). The media star is nothing but an entity committed to the semblance of life, to the spectacular, the opposite of an individual.

Considering himself the natural descendent of great artists of the past, Koons pretends that his works are related to religious works like Masaccio’s *Expulsion* and Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. For example, his porcelain gilded sculpture of Michael Jackson, a so called contemporary replica of *Pietà*, appears as tragic to him. In the eyes of Koons, Jackson the media star, harassed by the public and the press, is the very contemporary tragic hero and the way in which the celebrity is treated in contemporary society constitutes an authentic tragic condition. In a similar way Damien Hirst (Britain’s richest living artist), author of the dead animal in formaldehyde sculptures, declares himself to be a Bacon disciple and refers to his own work as metaphysical meditation.

To solve this debate it is better to ask first what the meaning of tragic is nowadays. Could a simple particular fact, like the murder of Kennedy, the divorce of Koons and Cicciolina or the death of Michael Jackson, be tragic? The confusion between metaphysics and everyday life determines the category of tragic to dissolve, to lose its meaning. Once upon a time the tragic implied the human condition, the finitude, the conscience of death and at the same time the sublime. Nowadays it seems that every piece of news on TV can engage this category. Another fact which contributed to this state of confusion was the reduction of the tragic to the art of tragedy itself committed by the literary

\(^{11}\) Jeff Koons, one of the most famous living artists in America with works sold at prices of millions of dollars, husband of the politician and porn star Cicciolina for seven years, has started his artistic career very young by arranging items in the window of his father shop and worked as a commodity trader at the New York Stock Exchange.
critique. The very definition of tragedy in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is another source of vagueness and confusion in its contemporary interpretation. We cannot reduce the tragic to the two subjective feelings of fear and pity.

Hughes seems not to agree either. He spitefully suggested that the only relation between Koons’ works and the classical ones could be the material he used (marble, gold etc). Hughes groups all the works described above in the category of *Fast Art*, a concept similar to *fast food*. He claims that, especially in consumerist society, human nature needs *Slow Art* – art which can hold the time as a vase holds water, art that is not merely sensational, that does not get its message across in ten seconds, that is not falsely iconic, in a word – art that is the very opposite to mass media.

The same message is carried by the well known BBC documentary written by the British philosopher Roger Scruton and entitled *Why Beauty Matters*. It is the pursuit of beauty that helps us to understand our essence as spiritual beings. Invoking the classical Kantian definitions of beauty and taste, Scruton tries to signalize the danger implied by the abandonment of beauty. Losing beauty, which was central to our civilization for two thousand years, not as a subjective value but as a universal need of human beings, requires losing the meaning of life. Ignoring this need means finding ourselves in a spiritual desert. Using the same Kantian terminology we can add that losing beauty requires giving up the very definition of man related with the *disinterested pleasure* provided by beauty.

After a long period of time when the only aim of art was beauty, as one of the most important values of man (like truth and goodness), it seems that today beauty and good taste have no place in our lives. We have to face the fact that the era in which modern art with its transcendental power provided a remedy for the chaos and sorrow in everyday life, like religion did before, is also over. Twentieth century artists became weary of spiritual tasks… The randomness of contemporary life cannot be redeemed by art… Art has become an egocentric practice, not interested anymore in either human nature and what humans share or in the liberty of thought that distinguishes us from animals. Quoting Scruton we can say that one word marks everything nowadays and this word is *me*, *my* pleasures, *my* desires and that the art’s response to all this is: yes, go for it!

In a society centered on use and appetite, beauty is nothing but a side effect said Scruton probably thinking of the way Hirst (alongside with many of his disciples) has fallen back on repetitious works and pieces of exorbitant, vulgar bling. It seems that art turns its back on beauty and becomes a slave to the consumer culture feeding just our pleasures and addictions. It is as the works of

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12 “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, … in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (VI, 2).

13 Scruton specifies the 1750-1930 period.
art, instead of presenting reality, take revenge on it, spoiling what could have been a home and leaving us alienated in a spiritual desert. A need to desecrate the experience of sex and death, to destroy their spiritual significance for the sake of the shock itself appears in the most criticized works of Hirst\textsuperscript{14} (\textit{For the Love of God}, 2007) and Koons (\textit{Made in Heaven} series etc). It also seems that adverts become more significant than art. Works of art, like the skull of Damien Hirst (\textit{For the Love of God}, 2007), imitate the advert, the very mechanism in which the advert captures attention or tries to create a brand even with no product to sell except itself. Thus we can ask ourselves if what we are facing is the uncritical acceptance of the actual world with all its counterfeit values and compromises to the capitalist mechanics? Is it not the very path which Deleuze\textsuperscript{15} and Guattari spoke of, the disintegration of the subject and integration of the human in a desiring machine?

It seems that contemporary art aims mostly to disturb and break moral taboos, as if beauty is not important anymore. Originality\textsuperscript{16} at any moral cost is what matters instead. As such our society celebrates the new cult of shock and ugliness\textsuperscript{17}. In Scruton’s view this cult determines not only art and architecture but also our manners, our music and our language, which are also increasingly raucous and self centered. In a similar way with Hughes, Scruton criticizes artists whose works engage the category of kitsch, desecration and vulgar bling like Koons, Hirst, Gilbert and George, but he also includes in the cult of ugliness conceptual works of artists like Carl Andre and Martin Creed.

First it is important to take note that we are dealing with two contemporary art trends addressed by Scruton under the single category of ugliness. It is a fact that both trends reject the very category of beauty along with the transcendental and spiritual need of humanity. Hence both trends, in order to certify themselves as art, need only the vote of the \textit{Artworld} (critics, art market and art institutions) as the \textit{Institutional Theory of Art}\textsuperscript{18} requires. It is also a fact that the

\textsuperscript{14} Here we must take into consideration Hirst’s confession: “I can’t wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it. At the moment if I did certain things people would look at it, consider it and then say ‘f off’. But after a while you can get away with things”, appreciating the fact that he had at least the courage to admit it.

\textsuperscript{15} To be consulted Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari (1983). \textit{Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}. University of Minnesota Press.

\textsuperscript{16} We have to notice that this can’t be art in Kant terms. A work of art needs balance between originality and good taste, specified the philosopher in his theory of genius and the good taste is the most necessary condition.

\textsuperscript{17} We have to stress here once again the difference between ugliness and a beautiful representation of ugliness. From the beginning of our civilization it has been one of the tasks of art to transform the pain, the ugly and the sordid in a vivid and beautiful symbol of human condition. Hence the cult of ugliness refers only to the death of the beautiful representation.

\textsuperscript{18} The theory formulated by Arthur Danto and George Dickie is also the very premise which allows an artist like Tracey Emin, faced with her installation consisting in an unmade bed, to declare that her work is art just because she says it is.
master of both contemporary art trends is Duchamp himself, the one who deliberately discredited the very concept of art. Moreover there are artists like Hirst who take part in both. But there are significant differences between art that engages kitsch and makes a pact with the consumerist society assuming its inner values and mechanics and conceptual art.

Conceptual art gave up the aesthetic form for the sake of an idea. A light that goes on and off (Martin Creed, *The Lights going on and off*, 2000), a pale of bricks (Carl Andre, *Equivalent VIII*, 1974), a glass of water (Martin Craig Davis, *An Oak Tree*, 1973). The single aesthetics still valid for these works it is the most ascetic minimalism. The objects are plain or inexistence, it is only the intention, the gesture of the artist that makes the difference.

*An Oak Tree*, the well known installation of British artist Michael Craig-Martin, consists of a glass of water on a shelf and a text which explains why the physical appearance of the glass is in fact an oak tree. The text refers to philosophical concepts: substance and accidents, cause and effect like a philosophical poem. Some works of his former student at Goldsmith College, Damien Hirst seem to be a meditation on death: pills and pill bottles, flies, rotten meet, dead animals showed in tanks of *formaldehyde*. We recognize the same minimalist aesthetics with more stress on the element of shock.

The problem with shock is that what shocks you first time around becomes boring and null when repeated. The mechanics of shock are different from the mechanics of beauty. Kant states that a gifted disciple after he closely watches the work of a genius will soon be able to make a genius work himself. The disciple does not copy the form of the work or a manner but he appropriates the spirit of the great master, the very power to provide new rules to the art domain by paradigmatic examples. Shock is too ephemeral to make a link between artists. Nor is it a proper know how, a techne. This could be a reason for the very poor quality of so many second rate works by artists which strain to win the public pushing forward the single ingredient of shock, shock as cheap mimesis of a manner, shock for the sake of shock.

Interviewed by Scruton, Michael Craig-Martin tries to justify the aesthetic experience of a readymade: even if it is a different experience from the aesthetic pleasure and transcendence of traditional works it is not a lack of aesthetic experience. He confessed that as a student he was stunned in amazement in front of Duchamp’s works. The urinal is not meant to be beautiful, its aim was to captivate the imagination. So Duchamp gave a new definition of art, like any genius does in Kantian theory of the genius, with the only help of a paradigmatic work – his urinal. This new art has a new core apart from the skill and technique of the hand, apart from the optics and the too much

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19 “We have to get rid of art like we got rid of religion” said the artist in a 1968 BBC interview.
praised artistic eye. Craig declared that this was not a cynical attempt but an attempt to purify art from all corruption and prudishness.

A question has to be asked though – doesn’t this attempt relate to the modernist dualist approach in rejecting the sensuous side of the human being? Isn’t it in fact the same old Cartesian message: the very essence of the human has nothing to do with sensations, with the hand or the eye, it is all about the mind, the brain. Isn’t it true that this is how works like *An oak tree* work?

Conceptual works seem to give up beauty in order to dissociate themselves from the world of entertainment and commodity value. They renounce the very idea of pleasure in art in order to dissociate from the kitsch and its *fake catharsis*. Kitsch parodies Catharsis. Ambitious art, however, produces the same fiction of feelings; indeed, this was essential to it: “The documentation of actually existing feelings the recapitulation of psychical raw material, is foreign to it. It is in vain to try to draw the boundaries abstractly between aesthetic fiction and kitsch’s emotional plunder. It is a poison admixed to all art; excising it is today one of art’s despairing efforts.” (Adorno 2002, 239).

So what is art after Duchamp? Should the urinal and all the readymades, the conceptual installations and the kitsch objects of Hirst, Koons and Craig-Martin be interpreted only as jokes? Or are we facing a new way of perceiving the world, the view of a cynical, ironical and detached eye of an individual habituated with the consumer society? Being asked about the aim of contemporary art Craig-Martin responded that these works help people to understand better the world they live in, in a way that gives more meaning to them. Contemporary art is not about an ideal world, Craig-Martin continued. The role of art is to help people feel more at ease with the actual world, with the here and now and all its imperfections. But we have to ask: can we call this practice art? Could art be only a slice of life, asks Scruton in his turn? And we can add: is it not the field of politics, social activism or journalism what we are in fact talking about here? Has the artist of today become something between a poetic journalist and an original activist?

The work of art has to be more than a joke or an idea Scruton said. Indeed, if we enlarge the sphere of creativity and let in anything that surprises people and ignore any skill or Kantian good taste, the very definition of art will become vague and vacuous. Art is play, but not any game is art. Not every person could be an artist like the Marxist aesthetics dreamed about in the 30’s.

In Kant’s terminology we are facing an *aesthetic idea* reduced to a gesture, or to abstract *concepts*, with no particular *form or intuition* attached to it. This practice cannot be Art though, but some kind of a science. Maybe this practice is just second rate philosophy or maybe we are facing *The Emperor’s new clothes* as Craig-Martin himself suggested in his *An oak tree* text. Could the text of a conceptual work of art be a valid philosophical argument? This essay proposes a negative answer. We may say at most that it is a poem which
pretends to be an argument. Has visual art been transformed to poetry then? At any rate we have to admit that in a conceptual work the text is more important than the visual. Kant could have enjoyed this.

In what way could the contemporary apophthegm: \textit{a work of art has to be art because the artist says so}, be justified though? The opinion put forward by this essay is that we have to be cautious in accepting it. This work agrees with Scruton in stating that there has to be more than a gesture or an idea to make a work of art. Radical conceptualist art is better interpreted as an act of social protest with ideological message, the same anti-form and anti-art message: better to give up the beauty in order to avoid making a pact with consumerist society and its counterfeit Catharsis, the kitsch. Conceptualist works like \textit{An oak tree} or Joseph Beuys\textsuperscript{20} social sculptures are not authentic pieces of visual art but rather seminal messages of ethical, social content addressed to the blind consumer. They have no aesthetical visual value though, but only the critical value of the very negation of the kitsch alongside with the instrumentalist reason of the consumerist society.

These radical conceptual works are the works of the 70’s and early 80’s. At the end of the 80’s a new species of beauty was conceived. This essay agrees with Michael Craig-Martin in saying that there is a kind of contemporary beauty in Jeff Koons’ gigantesque balloon toys. Conceptual works can be beautiful but in their own way. Koons’ balloon toys (Fig. 1) are at a first glance too colorful and too minimalist but this is just the first glance. Their beauty coexists with a touch of ironic view of the world. In order to sense this beauty the interaction with the very works in a show is perhaps useful (the jpeg reproduction on the net is not enough as it is not with any classical artistic work). This paper believes that this beauty can also be felt in some of Gilbert’s and George’s large scale works too. And perhaps Damien Hirst’s shark, entitled \textit{The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living}, suspended in the transparent turquoise of the \textit{formaldehyde} solution impresses the public in the same way. A new species of beauty triumphs in contemporary design, installation, photography and cinematography, presenting postindustrial landscapes, everyday objects in austere or vivid colors, elegant shades of grey or hues of pink and neon green.

\textsuperscript{20} In the very words of Kara L. Rooney, the curator of the show entitled \textit{Process}, focused on Beuys’s work (the Rooster gallery, Manhattan) Beuys went from “maker of objects to artistic philosopher.”
Contemporary painting and sculpture, influenced by this new aesthetics, adopt the same minimalist forms and vivid colors. Michael Craig-Martin’s own works, made during the 90’s, (Fig. 2) provide some valuable examples of astoundingly beautiful contemporary art. Hughes himself values the work of the painter and photographer David Hockney, an artist who knows the contemporary world but also seems to know what to filter out of it, the English answer to Andy Warhol.

The error of the conservative art critics and philosophers like Hughes and Scruton, error that causes the vulnerability of their theses, is the venturesome assumption that beauty can be found only in traditional media like painting, drawing or sculpture. They are right about complaining that in the last years there has been a radical depreciation in the traditional art skills. It is also true that nowadays a lot of artists do not bother to apprehend the proper skills invoking the argument that the only needs of a contemporary artist are the ideas and the imagination. But new media is not to blame for all this. New media has technical skills of its own, skills needed in the process of artistic creation. The real reason for valuing only traditional media, figurative or abstract, is their own ignorance about new media and the possibility of a new kind of beauty. Even if they declare the contrary they in fact pursue the pointless task of resuscitation of traditional beauty. Hence this paper does not agree with Hughes in stating that only the painter or the sculptor are capable of a deep and full relation to the object. This essay considers that this state of contemplative union with the object is only dependant on the artist’s way of relating to the world. It is not a problem of the medium but
one of artist’s intentionality. The medium has its own message like McLuhan said but if you truly seek beauty you can find it in any medium of expression.

This paper agrees with Hughes in stating that the technical image, the machine view is not necessarily closer to the truth than drawing or painting. It is a fact that the truth of the world implies more than the accurate mimesis of the surface of the objects which the technical image can provide. But when we consider photography and cinematography as art, we are not interested in just mirroring the surface of the real or in the commercialization of a brand like mass visual media does.

In his documentary Scruton confronts the beautiful, tormented bed painted by Delacroix (Un Lit Défait, 1827) with the similar contemporary installation of Tracey Emin (My Bed, 1998), stating that it is impossible for the installation (being a real object, the unmade bed itself) to transfigure the ugliness of the world in a beautiful representation. This essay cannot agree with him either. The space of a three dimensional artistic installation is not the cartesian space of real objects, not an abstract but a virtual, intentional space. Maybe Emin’s installation is just a worthless, not functional work, a poor citation, a useless mockery, like Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ is, but we cannot accuse the general definition of an installation.

In this sense we can invoke the extraordinary beautiful installation of Oliafur Eliasson, The Weather Project (Fig. 3), exhibited in the middle of the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in 2003. This project reconstructs a beautiful pale yellow virtual sun in the huge hall. Two million visitors from all over the world
have come to visit and bow in amazement in front of this new god. In spite of
its lack of political message or any compromise with the consumerism the
project was world popular. Works of art like *The Weather Project*, contemporary
but still engaging categories as beautiful and sublime, seem to be the very place
where the deep human need for transcendent understanding has taken shelter.

Fig. 3. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003

Perhaps Scruton is right and humans still need to believe that life is more
than the everyday concerns, that there are more than appetites and utilitarian
needs. Projects like the one above make us think that people are still able to
experience the timeless moments when the presence of a higher, transcendental
order becomes almost tangible, people still know that there are things in life, like
friendship, beauty or love, which need no use, no functionality. Hughes ends his
documentary with a similar hope: people still need beauty, people still seek up
zones of silence and contemplation, arenas for free thought and unregimented
feeling. It seems that, in spite of the mass media arena that feeds him with shock
images of no cultural value, the contemporary individual has the same hunger for
aesthetic experience.

We are all aware that in a democratic society it is almost dangerous to
talk about good and bad taste. A lot of people, some artists included, claim that
in a democratic culture there is nothing like a standard of taste, and the
judgments of taste have to be considered as equal votes. It is also true that the
flux of images we are exposed to has made it almost impossible to decide what
is worth looking at, what are the images that matter. But we still have the
natural beauty as an instance to hang on to for guidance. The undoubted
possibility of all human individuals to enjoy the simple form of a flower, the image of a tree or a river gives us a strong argument to state that at the very base of all the beautiful things we can find firm standards originated in human nature. It is the same old lesson from Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the same lesson of Botticelli’s Venus (known today better as the icon of Adobe Illustrator), that tells that human appetites can be transcended, the lesson of the disinterested attitude in contemplation of a flower or a child playing. Apart from any desire for possession we can define beauty as a way of seeing, a way of understanding the world not through science or use. Perhaps today after science has disappointed us by turning out to be more subjective and uncertain than we thought, we will find time to really look at things. We do not need to explain a flower in order to understand what it means said Scruton quoting Lord Shaftesbury. The message of a flower is the flower.

Complaining about the contemporary need to desecrate the experience of sex and death for the sake of the shock itself, Scruton uncovers another frightful phenomenon: the denial of love, the attempt to redefine the world as though love was no longer a part of it. He warns us about the loveless feature of postmodern art and culture, about its determination to portray the human world as unlovable. This warning must arouse us: we do not have to endorse this alienation, but to look for the path back from the desert, guided by our still universal and vivid feeling of love, by the glimpses of the experience of the sacred, which the body of the beloved, more vivid than anything yet seeming not to belong to the everyday world, still provides us.

In conclusion, even if the 20th century’s hope that art was going to produce a social change was not achieved, or if it was, it was almost invisibly like Hughes suggested, art still possesses the power to lift us above the trivial and ordinary due to its aesthetic beauty. Even though beauty is not the sign of a higher order like Plato stated, even if it was not planted in the world by God and there is no God at all, we can state, like Scruton, that beauty is here to fill the God shape hole made by modern science. And beauty is here to stay. The cult of Art has replaced the cult of God, or in Hughes’ words museums supplanted the churches as places both of social congress and of civic pride. It seems that these contemporary cathedrals are the most suitable hideaway places from the commercial reign of mass media, an authentic kind of public space, uncorrupted by Heidegger’s das Man. Their safeguarding depends on all of us.

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21 In *Symposium* Plato interpreted Eros like a cosmic force, like a stairway to the luminous sphere of the divine. Even if it starts with desire this path ends with the very contemplation of an ideal.

22 In his documentary Scruton states that the capacity of beauty to redeem our sufferings is the one who shows why beauty can be seen as a substitute for religion.
BIBLIOGRAPHY