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*Beauty:
Sensational Experience*

Michael Murawinski

The Question

Like all things immersed in abstraction, beauty is a difficult term to truly define. Yet, when focused on a single object or entity presented to us clearly, we are able to label the thing as such: beautiful or not. How can something be so hard to define if determining the presence of beauty comes so easily to us? It is almost as if there is a list of specific criteria that we have reserved somewhere in the annals of our minds that explicitly tells us that:

- *A* is beautiful.
- *B* is beautiful.
- *C* is not beautiful.
- If something is *A* it is more beautiful than *D*.

Although we can simply label these feelings as innate reactions and be done with it, there is a level of reasoning behind them. Problems occur when we try to define beauty just as quickly as we recognize it because often these feelings are encrypted and difficult to put into words. But when we do take the time to look and explore the myriad possibilities the term “beauty” suggests, its definition both simple and complex, *can* be found and *does* reveal itself eventually, if not immediately.

Beauty as an Object of Desire

One way to define something is by describing its relationship to something else. For me (and all the other poor souls who have been claimed in its sake), one of the most beautiful things that exists in this world is love. I believe that love is bound to beauty¹⁸ in the sense that people who love must also be aware (either consciously or otherwise) of the beauty that is within the person or thing that they love. In order to love, one must be able to find the beauty on, in, or about the love-*ed*.

However, while it is impossible to find two people in love with each other that do not claim their significant other to be beautiful in some way¹⁹, one does not need to love someone or something in order to find them/it beautiful. Beauty is

¹⁸ If two people do not find each other beautiful and still claim that they are “in love,” then I believe they are “in love” by means of utilitarian benefit; that is to say, they “love” each other for the sole purpose of comfort in the act of merely labeling themselves as “in love.” They “love” only for the sake of the word and not for the deep caring and appreciation that is involved with “true love.” Also, love can often be ruined or perverted (as in murder occurring because someone says they love someone too much) in which case it becomes something that is not beautiful. In that case it is in the term “love” and not the feeling of the individual that beauty disappears. A perversion can still stake a claim in beauty as the reason for its inception, but perverted love is not a condition that is beautiful in and of itself. For my purposes, I am disregarding these ways of loving in my discussion and limiting myself only to real, positive, and – in the case of two people – shared love.

¹⁹ Two sexual partners might not love each other completely (as if the above footnote), but they might still love something about each other (face, legs, butt) because of how beautiful, or physically attractive that part of them is. At the same time, a father and son would not be attracted physically (in most instances) and might not say that the other is beautiful-looking, but they could still love an intangible part of the other (how they make them proud, how they respect them) in the same manner as the two lovers love the physical parts of each other. In both instances, love and beauty coexist, albeit in very different ways (and the same can be said for non-human things: music, painting, cars, etc.).

different than love, in that beauty can stand alone while love cannot. In other words, love is a subset of beauty. I believe that in order to define beauty, we must first separate it from the narrower viewpoint as an “object of longing” or as I’m calling it: love as described by Crispin Sartwell in the first chapter of his book, *Six Names of Beauty*. This interpretation incorrectly assumes too much in that love and beauty are inseparable. It does not account for the fact that beautiful things do not need to be loved in order for their beauty to exist. For example:

An adolescent male observer looks at a Playboy magazine for the first time and can't resist the allure of Miss December in all of her festive holiday charm. He takes in her curves and the soft, warm light bouncing off of her breasts. He can feel the command of her eyes take hold of him and turn his mind and body into a cornucopia of libidinal urges; his will attempts to wrestle against their power with little success. He reaches towards the page as if to feel the peach-like texture of her supple olive skin together with the smooth silk ribbon wrapped around her waist and thighs. He can recognize the perfume on her neck as Calvin Klein. He can taste the sweet nectar of her loins: delicious in its subtle 'muted'-ness yet unforgettable in its lingering subliminal splendor.

This image of a nude young woman obviously creates quite an impression on the boy as his senses become overwhelmed by her beauty. Her features make an immediate impact on him to the point where his other senses and processes are triggered (olfactory, tactile, salivatory) as if by some involuntary sexual Pavlovian response. But are these things the result of his desire, or love, of the “beautiful” woman? What if the woman were really in front of him, perhaps performing oral sex on the boy? Would his feelings

of beauty cease because his desires were fulfilled? Certainly not! I would even go as far as to assume that the boy would find her exponentially more beautiful. So we cannot just say that beauty is just the “object of longing.” But then what else could beauty be?

Beauty’s End Justified by its Means

Another beautiful thing that has an immediately intoxicating effect on par with Miss December is *Autumn Rhythm* (c. 1950), a painting by the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. People have written pages and pages on the power of a Pollock drip painting and how it immediately affected their notions of beauty and art. Filmmakers have felt it necessary to document²⁰ the genius of his technique, and the process by which his beautiful canvases are born. Sartwell says that, “In craft²¹, means and ends become intertwined so that the process itself by which the crafted object is made is experienced as an end: the process itself is beautiful, like a dance.” However, in order to create a beautiful work of art, one does not *need* the paintbrush, easel, application of paint, or any of the tools or processes involved in the creation to be beautiful themselves. All those things simply need to be effective in performing their allocated function to the specifications of the artist. In other words, just because an

²⁰ *Jackson Pollock*. Dir. Kim Evans. Perf. Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Elizabeth Pollock. 1987.

²¹ Although Sartwell uses the term “craft” and not “art,” I believe that they are one and the same to him. In *Six Names of Beauty*, Sartwell illustrates a scene of his step-father building a set of cabinets, and he uses language suggesting a comparison between craft to art: “I was struck by the way [his step-father] held and applied a hammer and the other simplest hand tools. He had great precision... his weathered hand directing the tool with a concentration that merged eye, hand, and tool into a single system” (Sartwell 2004, 7). Craft is traditionally something that is below art, but the way Sartwell describes it leads me to believe that he finds them equal.

object is beautiful does not guarantee that any particular aspect of its creation was, in itself, also beautiful²².

This is not to say that I am refuting the possibility of the tools, methods, or both used to create a beautiful work to be absolutely beautiful in and of themselves. Pollock's dance in creating his grand masterpieces is certainly a thing of beauty in and of itself. My point is that although both the method and the resulting painting are beautiful, their beauty lies in and only in themselves and not with their relationship to each other. Pollock's paintings are separate from the performances that create them: the theatrical application of paint and the artist's interaction with the picture plane, his dance, and his crushed cigarette butts littering the canvas. It is this seemingly haphazard method whose sum, calculated and experienced, is what makes the process beautiful and not necessarily the end result. He could have, hypothetically speaking (although Pollock would probably turn in his grave at the sheer thought of it), meticulously painted every individual line and splatter with strict precision and applied the various pigments by means of paint-covered brush to canvas contact with the same end result. In that case I think the end result, even if it were stripped of its dramatic method, could and would still stir the same feelings of beauty of the original.

In terms of the end result, the painting itself derives its beauty from the feeling we get as the viewer; when our field of vision is totally engulfed in the vast woven connections of

²² Example: Andy Warhol's prints of famous icons such as in *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). Marilyn Monroe might have been the most famous bombshell of the twentieth-century and Warhol's depiction might be the most famous of her many portraits, but Warhol's method – like the artist himself – was detached and lacked any kind of feeling and was certainly not beautiful, or at least as beautiful as Pollock's technique. Yet, while both methods are clearly on different levels of beauty, both their means are still incredibly beautiful.

spattered color and not the knowledge of how the artist created it. Most of the time we are unable to question the artist and left only to see the result and to determine our own feelings based on what is before us on the wall, or page through its own visual experience. The paint and canvas become something entirely different than just the manifestation of Pollock's hard work. He might have been listening to Mozart while he was painting, but to me the end result becomes a rendition of *Swan Lake* in all its majesty and grace, captured in some simultaneously static and dynamic state where the dancers stay forever young²³ and perform their ballet day and night. An overpowering and almost hallucinatory bombardment of our visual and tangible senses in Pollock's work is what makes them so beautiful, not the means by which this phenomenon is achieved (albeit separate and coincidental, the means are also very beautiful).

The Beauty of Utilitarian Non-Art

While a great many things can be said about Pollock's work, beauty is not limited to things which are intended to be beautiful (as in art). For example, a tire-iron is useful, strong, metal, cross-shaped, rusted, etc., but I do not know anyone when candidly asked to name two beautiful things, would mention a tire-iron in the same breath as *Autumn Rhythm*. But why is this so? The first reason that comes to my mind is the fact that the tire-iron is an object with a specific task to handle, and it owes its entire existence entirely to its effectiveness at completing that task; its utilitarian-ness dictates its worth, and

²³ Although, interestingly enough, many of Pollock's drip paintings are in a state of decay because of the type of paint he used... coincidence? Maybe, but then again, maybe not. In terms of which vehicle for beauty – the means or the end, the *act* of painting or the *act-ual* painting – is *more* beautiful, perhaps Pollock's answer lies in which one will outlast the other.

not its aesthetic value. Unlike *Autumn Rhythm*, a tire-iron has no conventional purpose in the art world, because, in all likelihood, whoever invented the tire-iron did not consider themselves to be an artist of any kind and, thus, had no intention to create the tire-iron as a work of art. Someone made the tire-iron to do one thing and one thing only and that was to aid in the process of separating and combining tire and car, not to be hung in a gallery, gawked at, or studied.

The same title of “non-art” can be applied to most other utilitarian objects and tools. In Sartwell’s book on beauty, he correctly identifies that “beauty as suitedness to use is wrong” (Sartwell 1958, 7). That is, in order to *define* beauty, we cannot rely at all on the object’s utilitarian value. He goes on, however, to make a connection between an object’s function and the definite beauty in its ability to “bring our desires to fruition.” He believes that a “[beautiful] tool both expresses a desire and leads toward its satisfaction” (Sartwell 2004, 8). But then what happens to the object’s beauty after it has fulfilled its purpose²⁴? If a tire-iron is beautiful because it was successful in taking a lug nut off of a tire when I was longing to put a spare on my car so I could get to a date on time, then, according to Sartwell, after the deed was done the tire-iron would lose its beauty; it will have essentially exhausted its supply of expressive qualities. But if the object in question is being judged according to appearance, and looks the same before, during, and after its use, then its beauty must remain constant with its form; beauty does not cycle through a repetition of buildup and release (as desire does).

In addition to my belief that it is wrong to use love to define beauty, describing a tool’s beauty in terms of its ability to help us realize our longing desires is just as incorrect.

²⁴ This goes back to my previous point about the boys desires being fulfilled by Miss December.

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Rather than to claim tools are beautiful because they hold some kind of power in their use, I believe it is better to say that these types of tools are “necessary²⁵” or “effective²⁶” in their use or design. What a beautiful tool shares with *Autumn Rhythm*, and Pollock’s dance, and even the photo of the naked woman, is the judging of its inherent beauty as a result of our experience with it. We cannot find the beauty in a tire-iron unless we really look at the tire-iron, take it in through an experience that eliminates its intended purpose and portrays it as an object capable of aesthetic appreciation. Imagine this:

You’re walking along a wooded path and spot something glinting in the distance. It looks shiny and oh! so appealing. You run until the object is at your feet and then reach down and grab it. A firm tug and you rip it from the soil and hold it up to your face. It’s a metal object; smooth to the touch with two long shafts, each about two feet in length and made from strong, solid, stainless steel fused together at the exact centers to form a perpendicular angle. You run your finger along one of the shafts to better feel how flawless and perfect²⁷ the surface is. At the end of each pole there is a

²⁵ Alluding to the difficulty the task would pose without the use of the tool.

²⁶ Alluding to the ability of a specific tool to perform the given task as judged against the ability of a similar type of tool’s “effective”-ness to complete the same objective.

²⁷ I do not believe that an object needs to be perfect in order to be beautiful. A flower, for example, needn’t be perfectly symmetrical in order to be beautiful (Beam 2005, 3). In fact, the beauty of the natural world, I believe, in its asymmetry and flaws. Even if a tree *could* grow to be perfectly symmetrical, it could never be as beautiful as a real tree – with all of its twists and forks. Trees derive their beauty from the feelings we get examining their branches, climbing on its limbs, putting our hand in the mysterious hole in hopes to find something incredible; every shoot off of the main trunk is like an adventure. Every tree is different and exudes different feelings: some are proud and tall while others are bent and humble like an old woman pushing a shopping cart. We experience the beauty of nature through its inexact, asymmetrical, unbalanced features. But, on the

hole inside, all of them hexagons. You fit your index finger in the first hole and it fits like a glove; all six flat sides surround you like six sturdy walls and your finger feels safe. You grab one of the shafts near the end and hold it up so that the metal can reflect some of the few rays of light that make it through the canopy of the forest. It looks marvelous. You wave it around in the air and can feel the power in its weight. You smile, and can't take your eyes away from it.

This situation illustrates the beauty of the object through an experience that takes it beyond its ability to bring to fruition our utilitarian desires. A person had this same kind of experience when they saw Marcel Duchamp put a bicycle wheel upside-down on top of a stool in an art gallery along with other, more antiqued and traditional works. Both bicycle wheel and stool cease to function as such, and thus their meanings are changed as they become objects capable of being beautiful. The tire-iron is now beautiful because we have shown the beauty in the way the light hits it, its texture, its weight, the shape and form of it. The senses drive the force behind the experience, which is the real definition of beauty.

Making Sense of the Senseless

We cannot limit ourselves in our attempt to define beauty by the associations we make between things that are related or have a defined place in the real world (the desire we feel from looking at pornography, the pleasure of using an effective saw, the means justifying the ends). We must think about utilitarian objects like the tire-iron as if they never had a function in the first place other than to exist: as if they could be found growing on a tree branch in a park. We must put into

contrary, many man-made utilitarian objects hold some facet of their beauty in perfection.

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practice a lesson learned from the readymade sculptures of Marcel Duchamp (i.e. *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, or *Fountain*, 1917) and take those everyday notions of function, purpose, fine art, love, desire, and throw them out the metaphysical window. We need to clear our heads and start from scratch, to abandon those preconceived notions. We must ask ourselves what it is something really does for us, to us that make it beautiful

Furthermore beauty, as the old saying goes, is in the eye of the beholder; a personal realization coupled with individual preference, bias, etc. Therefore it is impossible to predict beauty, or to make something that every human being finds beautiful. But the common link that all things share, when we consider beauty for beauty's sake, is that something we consider to be beautiful does *something* to us. Something beautiful has a way of transcending its inherent significance and becoming something more than itself. Beauty is perpetual and can come from anywhere. Beauty does not need beautiful parents to be beautiful. But most importantly, what is the culmination of what "Beauty is..." and "Beauty does..." is that beauty is the marriage of spiritual and sensational experience.

What beauty does for us (the *something* alluded to earlier) is establish a link between the physical world and the concept of faith; a way of understanding, by using the tools of our bodies we normally use to examine the world that surrounds us, the mysteries of the universe that science and logic has labeled *enigmatic*. Beauty resists a concrete definition because it *is* a definition. It is what allows us to make sense of more difficult concepts like God, love, life, death. Beauty is our sixth sense, but the only sense that is able to make sense of the other parts of the world that are, well, a bit more senseless/irrational than the rest.

Murawinski

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