

# Ideality of beauty

*di Simona Chiodo*  
[simona.chiodo@polimi.it](mailto:simona.chiodo@polimi.it)

The cornerstones of the Western notion of beauty, from ancient philosophy to the aesthetics of the last three decades, seem to say that it has quite a stable core. The article argues that this core consists in the most surprising power which beauty appears to have: the power of fulfilling even our imagination, that is, the power of making us undergo the aesthetic experience of a satisfactory relationship between the reality we observe and the ideality we imagine, and, through its example, the power of making us work on the development of our reality. If this is true, then the reason why beauty has been, is, and will possibly be exceedingly important is that, by making us undergo the aesthetic experience of recognizing something ideal into something real, it can be the clearest symbol of our possibility, and even hope, of working on an ideal human measure of both our identity and our relationship with nature and the realm of artifacts.

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## 1.

If I asked myself “What is beauty?”, then, as a philosopher, I would necessarily have to consider, at least, the most important arguments which philosophers have articulated around the notion of beauty over the millenary history of philosophy. It would surely be a very instructive endeavor, but, as it happens with notions which are both historically and theoretically complex, it would entail the risk of neglecting the possible answer to the following question: “What do I mean when I say that X is beautiful?”.

So, let us start from the possible answer to the second question through a sort of phenomenological exercise. I open a catalogue of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photographs, and I set myself the task of selecting the feminine portrait which I would describe by means of the aesthetic category of beauty. I select *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* (1960). Now, my next task is more complicated, since I need to articulate the reasons why I describe it by means of the aesthetic category of beauty. My reasons are the following:

1. analytically, I would say that the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is beautiful because, paradoxically enough, it has *a surprising power of not surprising me at all through unexpected, strange, and*

*discordant elements*. In particular, I would say that the face is predominantly characterized by the features of the eyes, the eyelids, and the eyelashes. The latter almost introduce, namely, make me expect, the shape of the eyebrows, which are a sort of continuation of the curve of the eyelashes, and outline an arch. This is, in turn, analogous to the curve of the eyes and the eyelids, and runs parallel to their shapes in a precise passage, which goes from its highest point inwards. The shape of the eyebrows almost introduces the shape of the nose. The shape of the mouth almost continues the kind of smile which is outlined by the shapes of the eyes, the eyelids, and the eyelashes: a smile which welcomes, but does not cause the distortion of the shapes. Ultimately, the facial outline almost exalts the elements analyzed above: the shape of the chin, which does not exhibit discontinuous elements (that is, angular elements), is, at the same time, sharp (also thanks to the shadow), and gives prominence to the curve of the smile of the mouth. And the shape of the cheekbones, which noticeably extends the facial features upwards, outlines a sort of frame for the eyes, which are lengthened enough to exalt the interplay between their shapes and the shapes of the eyelids, the eyelashes, and the eyebrows. Therefore, what I would say to be characteristic and distinctive of the beauty of the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is a sort of continuity – a continuity which means two things: the continuity between a first particular element and a second particular element, and, above all, *the continuity between the particular element I am observing and the particular element I would imagine to find soon afterwards the particular element which I am observing*.

2. Synthetically, I would say that the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is beautiful because it has *a surprising power of being what I would imagine if I were to ask myself what a feminine face look like*. In other words, the reason why I describe the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* by means of the aesthetic category of beauty is that it has *a surprising power of making me undergo the aesthetic experience of recognizing what I would imagine into what I observe, that is, the aesthetic experience of*

*recognizing something ideal<sup>1</sup> (which is what I would imagine) into something real (which is what I observe).*

The result of my tasks seems to be the following: if I ask myself to select the feminine portrait which I would describe by means of the aesthetic category of beauty (first task) and to say the reason why I describe it by means of the aesthetic category of beauty (second task), then I realize that what founds both my answers is the exercise of my *imagination*. Indeed, the feminine portrait I would describe by means of the aesthetic category of beauty is that for which, given a particular element I am observing (the shapes of the eyes, the eyelids, and the eyelashes), and imagining the particular element I would find soon afterwards (the shape of the eyebrows), I realize that, as soon as I stop carefully observing the first element and start carefully observing the second element, the reality observed (the real shape of the eyebrows, which is the object of my observation) exceedingly fulfills the ideality imagined (the ideal shape of the eyebrows, which is the object of my imagination). Hence, the reason why I describe the portrait by means of the aesthetic category of beauty is founded on the exercise of my imagination, since what I seem to be actually experiencing when I say that the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is beautiful is a sort of fulfillment of what I would imagine through what I observe. Therefore, the possible answer to the question “What do I mean when I say that X is beautiful?” is that *beauty appears to be the aesthetic experience of a surprising fulfillment of imagination through reality*. That is, *beauty seems to be what has the surprising power of fulfilling even the imagination: beauty can satisfy a human being who is observing something real, but the most characteristic and distinctive power of beauty is that, surprisingly, it can satisfy a human being who is imagining something ideal*.

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<sup>1</sup> When I use the word “ideal”, I make reference to the Kantian notion of ideal, that is, to its official introduction in philosophy, by distinguishing between the notion of “idea” and the notion of “ideal”. In particular, the Kantian ideal is founded on the exercise of imagination, which forms an «aesthetic normal idea» (I. Kant, *Critique of the power of judgment*, 5, 233), working together with «the idea of reason» (*ibid.*, 5, 234), which has to do with perfection, starting from the moral realm.

## 2.

Let us continue our reasoning through a counterexample. My next tasks are the following two: to select the feminine portrait I would describe by means of the aesthetic category of the antonymous of beauty, that is, by means of the aesthetic category of ugliness, and to articulate the reasons why I do so. I select *Portrait of Edith Piaf* (1946). And my reasons are the following:

1. analytically, I would say that it seems possible to make reference to the opposite reasons than those I deployed to describe the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* as beautiful. That is, I would say that the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Edith Piaf* is ugly because it surprises me through unexpected, strange, and discordant elements. In particular, I would say that it is characterized by eyes (extremely small, with swollen eyelids and bags under the eyes) whose shapes do not introduce at all, namely, do not make me expect at all, the shapes of the eyebrows (extremely long and slight, features which are the opposite of the swollen eyelids and bags under the eyes, and give me the feeling of something unnatural, as if they were concealing something unhealthy). And I would say that the face exhibits a chin (small and not protruding) whose shape does not introduce at all, namely, does not make me expect at all, the shape of the brow (big, extended). Once again, I would say that the face is characterized by sagging nose and mouth (as if they weighed too much in comparison with the other parts of the face), and that it features a sort of cuts outlined by wrinkles, lights, and shadows, all elements which seem to accentuate the general impression of saggiess.

2. Synthetically, I would say that the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Edith Piaf* is ugly because it is not at all what I would imagine if I were to ask myself what a feminine face looks like. That is, the reason why I describe the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Edith Piaf* by means of the aesthetic category of ugliness is that it does not make me undergo at all the aesthetic experience of recognizing what I would imagine into what I observe. Indeed, I do not recognize something ideal (which is what I would imagine, for instance a continuity between the shapes of the eyes and the shapes of the eyebrows) into something real (which is what I observe, for instance a

discontinuity between the shape of the extremely small and pressed eyes and the shape of the extremely long and slight eyebrows).

The counterexample leads my reasoning further. If I were to explain what constitutes the radical absence of the aesthetic experience of recognizing something ideal into something real, then I would say that it means the radical absence of quite a specific thing: a sort of humanity, that is, a sort of *human measure*. Even more specifically, I would say that it means the radical absence of a kind of *ideal human measure*, which is the best way to synthesize the idea of *what I would imagine that a human being should be in order to be a human being in an authentic sense, that is, ideally*.

But what can I observe in the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Edith Piaf*? It seems to lack four important elements, at least. The first has to do with the sphere of health: the feminine face features extremely swollen eyelids, bags under the eyes and extremely slight eyebrows, which suggest something unnatural, almost a counterfeit concealing something unhealthy. Furthermore, the nose, mouth, and skin are flaccid, conveying an exaggerated impression of saggingness. The second element is related to the sphere of femininity: the face is characterized by the absence of classic expressions of femininity, such as a particular attention to makeup, hairstyle, and a more empathetic look. The third element has to do with the sphere of order (which is a more specific notion connected to that of continuity): the face exhibits several unexpected, strange, and discordant elements, among which are eyes whose shape does not introduce at all the shape of the eyebrows and a chin whose shape does not introduce at all that of the brow. And the fourth element has to do with the sphere of humanity almost in an ethical sense: the face features a series of downward curves (among which are the nose and mouth, which seem to hang down, and a sort of cuts outlined by wrinkles, lights, and shadows which contribute to the general impression of saggingness described above). These downward curves, to which one could add the curves of the neck and the shoulders, appear to aesthetically represent a sort of human surrender, more specifically a sort of ethical surrender. Therefore, once again, the reason why I describe the feminine face represented in *Portrait of Edith Piaf* by means of the aesthetic category of ugliness is that it does not have any

power of making me recognize a sort of ideal human measure, which is what I would imagine that a human being should have in order to be a human being in an authentic sense, that is, ideally (for example, in the case of a feminine face, this should have the power of making me recognize health, femininity, order, and humanity almost in an ethical sense).

### 3.

My answer to the question “What do I mean when I say that X is beautiful?” makes me realize another interesting aspect: my aesthetic experience of beauty is autonomous from my aesthetic experience of pleasure. Speaking about autonomy means speaking about the fact that I realize that my possible aesthetic experiences are of four kinds:

1. I can say “X is aesthetically beautiful. And observing it makes me feel aesthetic pleasure” (which is what seems to be happening when I look at *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe*);

2. I can say “X is not aesthetically beautiful. And observing it does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure” (which is what seems to be happening when I observe *Portrait of Edith Piaf*);

3. but I realize that I can also say “X is aesthetically beautiful. But observing it does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure”;

4. and I realize that I can also say “X is not aesthetically beautiful. But observing it makes me feel aesthetic pleasure”.

Let us focus on the cases 3 and 4. As for the case 3, I could say what follows. Suppose I am observing *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe*, and realize that the feminine face represented reminds me of another feminine face: that of a woman who has been remarkably unpleasant to me. I am likely to say that “Observing *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure”. But I could not say that “*Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is not aesthetically beautiful”, supposing I can still perceive its aesthetic features, which have already been described. On the contrary, I should say that “*Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is aesthetically beautiful. But observing it does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure”. And the reason why I should say so is that I should be able to distinguish what is aesthetically beautiful from what

makes me feel aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, to be aesthetically beautiful has a sort of objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity, whereas to be aesthetically pleasant is irreducibly contingent, for it is rooted in the irreducible subjectivity of one's own biography. To use a different example: I happen to read medieval poetry, for instance Guido Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore*, which does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure. Yet I am able to say that it is aesthetically beautiful, and I argue so by making reference to specific reasons, which are "technical", founded on the features of its literary "form". As for the case 4, I could say what follows. Suppose I am observing *Portrait of Edith Piaf*, and realize that the feminine face represented reminds me of another feminine face: that of a woman who has been remarkably pleasant to me. I am likely to say that "Observing *Portrait of Edith Piaf* makes me feel aesthetic pleasure". But I could not say that "*Portrait of Edith Piaf* is aesthetically beautiful", supposing I can still perceive its aesthetic features, which have already been described. On the contrary, I should say that "*Portrait of Edith Piaf* is not aesthetically beautiful. But observing it makes me feel aesthetic pleasure". And the reason why I should say so is that I should be able to distinguish what is not aesthetically beautiful from what does not make me feel aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, not to be aesthetically beautiful has a sort of objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity, whereas not to be aesthetically pleasant is irreducibly contingent, rooted in the irreducible subjectivity of one's own biography. To use a different example: I happen to listen to contemporary pop music, for instance the song X, which I am even ashamed to name, because I am even ashamed to let you know that it makes me feel aesthetic pleasure. But I am able to say that it is not aesthetically beautiful, and I argue so by making reference to specific reasons, which are "technical", founded on the features of its musical "form".

Hence, the interesting thing is the following: the autonomy of my aesthetic experience of beauty from my aesthetic experience of pleasure means that, especially if I am a philosopher (or a critic, or whoever is interested in beauty and pleasure), I could, and I should, distinguish between what seems to be there anyway, namely, something I could judge anyway, even when my idiosyncratic biographical conditions change, and what does not seem to be



there anyway, namely, something I could judge anyway, even when my idiosyncratic biographical conditions change. The former is exemplified by Guido Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore*: the beauty, for instance, of the rhotacism of its title is there, and it is something which could be judged anyway both by me and by you. The latter is exemplified by the pleasure related to the song X: the pleasure, for instance, of the melody of its refrain is not there, and it is not something which could be judged anyway both by me and by you. We are likely to agree that the refrain of the song does not make us feel the aesthetic experience of beauty. But we are not likely to agree that its refrain makes us feel the aesthetic experience of pleasure. I can say that its refrain gives me pleasure because it reminds me of a happy summer of my childhood. But you cannot say the same. And, even if you could, what founds what we say is idiosyncratically biographical, that is, irreducibly contingent, subjective, not arguable on the basis of a sort of objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity.

On the contrary, beauty seems to have a sort of objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity, which requires competent judges: when I observe *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* I can feel the aesthetic experience of beauty, but I would be able to feel it more if a competent judge gave me more *reasons*, that is, objective, or at least intersubjective, features of the portrait, starting from its shapes and colors, all elements which can be observed, understood, and judged both by you and by me. In fact, I can say that I am willing to seek, and to carefully listen to, a more competent judge than myself anytime I happen to encounter an object which makes me feel the aesthetic experience of beauty. But I cannot say that I am willing to seek, and to carefully listen to, a more competent judge than myself anytime I happen to encounter an object which makes me feel the aesthetic experience of pleasure. Once again, beauty seems to be founded on reasons which do not account for pleasure, and the result is that beauty seems to be shareable in a way in which pleasure does not seem to be.

#### 4.

The tasks I gave myself led me to argue two points in particular:



1. the most surprising characteristic which beauty seems to have is the distinctive power of satisfying a human being who is imagining something ideal, for the aesthetic experience of beauty appears to consist in the aesthetic experience of recognizing something ideal (which is what I would imagine) into something real (which is what I observe);

2. the reasons which lead us to describe something as beautiful found a sort of objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity, which is not rooted in the irreducibly contingent and idiosyncratic subjectivity of one's biography.

Both 1 and 2 seem to make reference to an ancient notion of beauty, which is Platonic. Therefore, am I trying to argue that the most promising notion of beauty is *sui generis* Platonic? Not exactly. Indeed, what I am arguing is that a *sui generis* Platonic notion of beauty is most promising, and, perhaps for this reason, it has never actually stopped founding the historical articulations of the Western notion of beauty over the centuries, giving it more stability than what it seems to have.

Let us make the classic example which is used to argue the opposite thesis, that is, that the various articulations of the Western notion of beauty over the centuries prove its radical instability, and radically divide its present from its past, and from its Platonic past in particular. Consider, on the one hand, the feminine body which used to be the paradigm of feminine beauty in the seventeenth century (for example, the body represented in *Venus at the mirror* by Pieter Paul Rubens, which is overweight and even affected by cellulite). On the other hand, consider the twentieth-century paradigm of feminine beauty (for example, one of the photographs of the model Twiggy, whose body is underweight and likely anorexic). The question is the following: "What can you honestly say about the Western notion of beauty?". The classic answer is that the Western notion of beauty is characterized by a radical instability, whose best name is relativity: both the Western notion of beauty in particular and the notion of beauty in general are extremely relative.

Yet, a possible counterargument begins with the following question: "What is the idea of beauty which *Venus at the mirror* represents? And what is the idea of beauty which the photograph of the model Twiggy represents?". A possible answer is the following: there is an important sense in which both

*Venus at the mirror* and the photograph of the model Twiggy represent an analogous, and even identical, idea of beauty, that is, an idea of beauty as ideal feminine body, which, in a century distinguished by undernourishment, is overweight and even affected by cellulite, whereas, in a century distinguished by overnourishment, is underweight and likely anorexic. In other words, both depictions signify an idea of beauty as *ideal human measure*.

Let us further develop our argument through another example. Suppose you have a specific aim: you are visiting a city, and you want to go from the point A (which is your hotel) to the point B (which is the art gallery you want to visit). It is a sunny day. Hence, you go from A to B on foot. But, when you get to B, you discover that the art gallery is closed: if you want to visit it, then you have to go back the following day. But the following day it is raining. So, you go from A to B by taxi. There is a possible structural analogy between what happens to beauty from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century and what happens to you from today to the following day: a discontinuity can be the symptom of a continuity, that is, the discontinuity of the means to achieve a specific aim can be the symptom of the continuity of the latter. As for what happens to you, it is possible to say that your means (on foot, by taxi) change precisely because your specific destination (to go from your hotel to the art gallery you want to visit) does not change at all. As for what happens to beauty, it is possible to say that its means (overweight and affected by cellulite, underweight and affected by anorexia) change precisely because its specific aim (to represent the ideal human measure of a feminine body) does not change at all.

## 5.

If the argument against the extreme instability and relativity of the Western notion of beauty is at least possible, let us try to go further, arguing that the core of the Western notion of beauty is Platonic, and in particular that it is founded on the successful relationship between the dimension of reality and the dimension of ideality.

Plato writes a most essential thing in his *Phaedrus*:

But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses; though not by that is wisdom seen; her loveliness would have been transporting if there had been a visible image of her, and the other ideas, if they had visible counterparts, would be equally lovely. But this is the privilege of beauty, that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight.<sup>2</sup>

Beauty is an ideal «form». But «the privilege of beauty» is that, «coming to earth», that is, going from the dimension of ideality to the dimension of reality, «she is also the most palpable to sight». In other words, in the dimension of reality in which we are, we cannot see «the other ideas», but we can see, at least, the real (particular, temporary) articulations of beauty. Hence, the real (particular, temporary) articulations of beauty are exceedingly important precisely because they are our first chance to do a crucial thing: to go from the dimension of reality to the dimension of ideality – beauty is our best chance to go from reality to ideality.

But why going from reality to ideality should be crucial? The answer is that it is crucial because it signifies a capacity which we should exercise in our daily activities: the capacity for abstraction, which leads us to go from a less promising real (particular, temporary) state of things to a more promising real (particular, temporary) state of things, that is, to a state of things which, even if it is still (and necessarily, Plato *docet*) real, particular, and temporary, it is, anyway, more promising than our initial state of things.

Suppose you were born (by chance, of course) in a certain city A. If you are an architect, whether you have visited or have not visited other cities in your life, your only chance to design a more promising city B depends on the capacity for abstraction. In the first case (supposing you have visited other cities in your life), you would work starting from your rich experience and your imagination. In the second case (supposing you have not visited other cities in your life), you would work starting from your poor experience and your imagination. But, in both cases, the question you should answer is the following: “What should an ideal city look like?” – that is, you should be capable of abstraction. This means that you should be capable of using the dimension of ideality as a *method*: as your method to go from a worse real

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<sup>2</sup> Plat. *Phaedr.* 250 c-e.

state of things (from a certain city A, in which you were born by chance) to a better real state of things (to a certain city B, which you design on purpose). If you are not capable of abstraction, then your possible working method to design the new city B is far from promising. It is a matter of copying, which means that the new city B will have only one possible way to be designed, because it will be the result of your copying the city A in which you were born by chance (and you will not be capable of making your artifact develop, be better than your initial artifact). But if you are capable of abstraction, then your possible working method to design the new city B is extremely promising: it is a matter of imagining, which means that the new city B will have unlimited possible ways to be designed, because it will be the result of your purposeful imagination. Thus, the city B will be developed out of unlimited possible alternatives to the city A in which you were born by chance (and you will be capable of making your artifact develop, be better than your initial artifact).

This is the reason why *the successful relationship between an observed reality and an imagined ideality which beauty symbolizes is essential*: the most fundamental power of beauty is that it is the clearest symbol of an essential method of ours – *the method of developing our reality through ideality*.

Plato's philosophy in general and Plato's notion of beauty in particular do not entail the enslavement of the (imperfect) dimension of reality to the (perfect) dimension of ideality, but a sort of guarantee for the former through the latter: the (perfect) dimension of ideality is crucial because it is our method of ensuring our passage from a more imperfect reality A to a less imperfect reality B. Said otherwise, what Plato's philosophy in general and Plato's notion of beauty in particular amount to is the development of our reality. (So, if you are an architect, and you happen to observe a beautiful city, then what this beautiful city means to you is your chance, which it clearly symbolizes, to design an even more promising city. And, if I am not an architect, and I happen to observe a beautiful object of any sort, then what this beautiful object of any sort means to me is my chance, which it clearly symbolizes, to produce an even more promising object of any sort, whether it

is an artifact, or it is my work on an idea, or it has to do with my actions towards nature, other human beings, and myself.)

Being “aesthetic”, that is, literally “sensible”, “perceptible” to our senses, beauty has the extraordinary power of working as an *example* for us – and examples are perhaps the best learning methods: if we want to learn to speak, then let us look at a speaking human being, and if we want to learn to produce better real objects, then let us look at a beautiful object. Indeed, by fulfilling what we would ideally imagine through what we are actually observing, a beautiful object encourages, firstly, our imagination and, secondly, our action to start working towards even more beautiful objects.

## 6.

However, even if we agree about the precious meaning of the Platonic notion of beauty, and, above all, its possible topicality for us, what about the modern and contemporary history of the Western notion of beauty? In particular, what about the subjective turn?

There is no space, here, for a detailed historical and theoretical analysis of the subjective turn, so let us outline a possible synthesis. In this sense, Burke’s notion of beauty can be even more paradigmatic than Hume’s. In particular, Burke, with the objective of severely counterarguing the ancient notion of beauty, chooses the following titles for the sections focused on the notion of beauty in his *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*: «Proportion not the cause of beauty in vegetables»<sup>3</sup>, «Proportion not the cause of beauty in animals»<sup>4</sup>, «Proportion not the cause of beauty in the human species»<sup>5</sup>, «Fitness not the cause of beauty»<sup>6</sup>, and «Perfection not the cause of beauty»<sup>7</sup>. At first, it would seem that the ancient notion of beauty is totally rejected. But let us go from the *pars destruens* to the *pars construens*, in which Burke proposes his own notion of beauty:

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<sup>3</sup> E. Burke, *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

On the whole, the qualities of beauty, as they are merely sensible qualities, are the following: first, to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but, fourthly, to have those parts not angular, but melted, as it were, into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. Sixthly, to have its colours clear and bright, but not very strong and glaring. Seventhly, or if it should have any glaring colour, to have it diversified with others.<sup>8</sup>

Now, let us attempt an experiment: let us compare Burke's definition of the notion of beauty with a paradigmatic example of the ancient notion of beauty, that is, *Aphrodite of Milos*. The possible relationship between the former and the latter is remarkable: *Aphrodite of Milos* seems «to be comparatively small» (its measure is almost that of a human being), «to be smooth» (it is polished), «to have a variety in the direction of the parts» (it is chiasmatic), «to have those parts not angular, but melted, as it were, into each other» (it is curved), and «to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength» (it is willowy). Burke severely opposes the ideas of proportion, fitness, and perfection. But *Aphrodite of Milos*' proportion, fitness, and perfection do not seem to be extraneous to Burke's definition of the notion of beauty, which appears to make reference, once again, to a sort of *ideal human measure* («to be comparatively small», «to be smooth», «to have a variety in the direction of the parts», «to have those parts not angular, but melted, as it were, into each other», and «to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength»).

And the sense in which proportion, fitness, and perfection can found both the ancient notion of beauty and the modern notion of beauty is the following. As for proportion, it can be the way in which it is possible to grant a sort of ideal human measure by making reference, for instance, to the fact that the left limbs of a human being are proportioned to his right ones (something which is rather true for Plato, for Burke, and even for us, who do not seem to totally reject this concept at all). As for fitness, it can be the way in which it is possible to grant a sort of ideal human measure by making reference, for instance, to the fact that the proportion between the left limbs of a human being and his right ones is appropriate because it is one of the conditions which facilitate his existence (which is rather true for Plato, for Burke, and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

even for us, who do not seem to totally reject this idea at all). And as for perfection, it can be the way in which it is possible to grant a sort of ideal human measure by making reference, for instance, to the fact that if the proportion between the left limbs of a human being and his right ones is suitable, and even perfect, this is one of the conditions which facilitate his natural selection.

Hence, it seems possible to argue that, even if the Western notion of beauty has been variously articulated, this does not mean the existence of various Western notions of beauty – on the contrary, *the variety of articulations of the Western notion beauty seems to serve the purpose of conserving a core which is decidedly less variable*. This core appears to be founded, once again, on a sort of *ideal human measure*, whose meaning seems to make reference to the surprising power of a beautiful thing of looking like what we would imagine if we were to ask ourselves what that particular thing is. Indeed, beauty has the surprising power of making us undergo the aesthetic experience of recognizing what we would ideally imagine into what we really observe. In other words, it ultimately possesses *the surprising power of fulfilling even our imagination, namely, of satisfying us when we observe something real which makes us imagine something ideal*.

## 7.

But what about the contemporary Western notion of beauty, which appears to have been rediscovered after almost a century of neglect? If we refer to the monographs written on the notion of beauty over the last three decades<sup>9</sup>, then we can say that their theoretical cornerstones seem to be the following:

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<sup>9</sup> In particular, among the monographs written on the notion of beauty (both historically and theoretically oriented) over the last three decades, see the following: M. Mothersill, *Beauty restored*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984, D. Hickey, *The invisible dragon: four essays on beauty*, Art Issues Press, Los Angeles 1993, R. Bodei, *Le forme del bello*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1995, E. Zemach, *Real beauty*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1997, J. Kirwan, *Real beauty*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1999, E. Scarry, *On beauty and being just*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, W. Steiner, *Venus in exile: the rejection of beauty in twentieth-century art*, Free Press, New York 2001, N. Zangwill, *The metaphysics of beauty*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2001, A. Danto, *The abuse of beauty: aesthetics and the concept of art*, Open Court, Chicago 2003, J. Lane, *Timeless beauty: in the arts and everyday life*, Green, Totnes 2003, W. Menninghaus, *Das Versprechen der Schönheit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003, J. Armstrong, *The secret power of beauty*, Allen Lane,



1. a request for *ethics*, both in the relationships between human beings and in the relationships between human beings, nature and the realm of artifacts. And the reason why beauty can satisfactorily answer this request is rooted in its ancient history: one of the most defining characteristics of the ancient notion of beauty is the relationship between its aesthetic and ethical dimensions;

2. a request for *epistemological extension*, which especially signifies the possibility of exercising reasonableness and rationality in dimensions which contemporary Western culture often ascribes to the dimensions of unreasonableness and irrationality. And the reason why beauty can satisfactorily answer this request is rooted in its ancient and modern history. On the one hand, one of the most important features of the ancient notion of beauty is its relationship with the notion of truth (which, for example, Plato puts in the dimension of «the celestial forms», that is, in the dimension of the «ideas», together with beauty). On the other hand, one of the most fundamental characteristics of the modern notion of beauty is its relationship with the notion of knowledge (for example, Baumgarten founds the *gnoseologia inferior* on the aesthetic dimension. The *gnoseologia inferior* is in fact not characterized by the reasonableness and the rationality of the *gnoseologia superior*, which is founded on the logical dimension, but it is not

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London 2004, U. Eco (ed. by), *Storia della bellezza*, Bompiani, Milano 2004, C. Sartwell, *Six names of beauty*, Routledge, New York 2004, P. Guyer, *Values of beauty: historical essays in aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2005, E. Prettejohn, *Beauty and art 1750-2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2005, F. Cheng, *Cinq méditations sur la beauté*, Albin Michel, Paris 2006, J.A. McMahon, *Aesthetics and material beauty: aesthetics naturalized*, Routledge, London-New York 2007, A. Nehamas, *Only a promise of happiness: the place of beauty in a world of art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2007, A. Carlson, G. Parsons, *Functional beauty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2008, J.-P. Changeux, *Du vrai, du beau, du bien*, Odile Jacob, Paris 2008, F. Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2008, T.T. Williams, *Finding beauty in a broken world*, Pantheon Books, New York 2008, D. Beech (ed. by), *Beauty*, MIT Press, London-Whitechapel-Cambridge 2009, R. Scruton, *Beauty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2009, F. Jullien, *Cette étrange idée du beau*, Grasset, Paris 2010, Y. Reisner, *Architecture and beauty: conversations with architects about a troubled relationship*, Wiley, Chichester 2010, H. Gardner, *Truth, beauty, and goodness reframed*, Baror, Armonk 2011, J. Griffin, J., *On the origin of beauty: ecophilosophy in the light of traditional wisdom*, World Wisdom, Bloomington 2011, D. Rothenberg, *Survival of the beautiful: art, science, and evolution*, Bloomsbury Press, New York 2011, A. Heller, *The concept of the beautiful*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2012 and A. Médam, *Un désir de beauté*, Liber, Montréal 2012.

characterized by the unreasonableness and the irrationality of dimensions totally extraneous to gnoseology either);

3. a request for *interdisciplinarity*, which particularly means the possible interaction between humanities and sciences, with a focus on the relationship between beauty, on the one hand, and evolutionism and neuroscience, on the other hand.

As for 1 and 2, an important part of the core of the ancient notion of beauty seems to have been rediscovered and re-elaborated. In particular, as for 1, the most remarkable references among the monographs quoted in the footnote could be the following: Bodei's *Le forme del bello* and Sartwell's *Six names of beauty*, which both focus on the etymological and historical relationship between beauty and ethics in numerous cultures; Scarry's *On beauty and being just*, in which the relationship between beauty and human beings' ethical existence is central; Steiner's *Venus in exile: the rejection of beauty in twentieth-century art*, in which the cornerstone of the meaning of beauty is transferred from the aesthetic dimension of shapes to the ethical dimension of relationships; Armstrong's *The secret power of beauty*, in which beauty results from a sort of suitability between an aesthetic dimension and a value which can be ethical; and Gardner's *Truth, beauty, and goodness reframed*, which considers the relationship between beauty and goodness. And, as for 2, the most significant references could be the following: Mothersill's *Beauty restored*, whose thesis is that judging beauty means «making a claim»<sup>10</sup>, because «the judgment of taste is normative in a way that remarking on what one finds agreeable is not»<sup>11</sup>; Nehamas' *Only a promise of happiness: the place of beauty in a world of art*, which contends that beauty challenges our understanding, being both «a step beyond our understanding»<sup>12</sup> and a «promise of more»<sup>13</sup>; and Scruton's *Beauty*, whose argument is that «the experience of beauty, like the judgment in which it issues, is the prerogative of

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<sup>10</sup> Here I am quoting the edition published in 1991: M. Mothersill, *Beauty restored*, Adams-Bannister-Cox, New York, p. 377.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> A. Nehamas, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

rational beings»<sup>14</sup>, because «the description of something as beautiful has the character of a judgment, a verdict, and one for which I can reasonably be asked for a justification»<sup>15</sup>.

But there is another, and even more essential, part of the core of the ancient notion of beauty which seems to have been rediscovered and re-elaborated: a sort of *ideality of beauty*. Indeed, making beauty the first step towards both ethics and understanding means *idealizing*, that is, abstracting, and *making beauty the aesthetic representation of something other than itself, the aesthetic symbol of something other than itself* – in particular, making beauty the aesthetic symbol of the ideal human measure gestures towards the answer to the following question: “*What would I imagine that a human being’s ideal identity is (in terms of aesthetics, ethics, and understanding) if I were to ask myself what a human being’s ideal identity is (in terms of aesthetics, ethics, and understanding)?*”.

If it is possible to argue that beauty can have an ideal essence, that is, if it is possible to argue that beauty can symbolize the ideal human measure, then beauty is exceedingly valuable for us: beauty has been, is, and will possibly be one of our most promising means to do a crucial thing, namely, to develop something real through the imagination of something ideal (in particular, through the imagination of the ideal development of something real). This is possible because of the hope which beauty affords us, thanks to its «palpab[ility] to» our senses. Thus the ideality of beauty is, metaphorically speaking, a horizon line: the latter cannot be touched by our feet, since the more we walk towards it the more it recedes, but, precisely because it is untouchable by our feet, it forces them to always move, and never stop.

Ultimately, therefore, the reason why the beautiful feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is valuable to me is not that it makes me disregard my real face through a sort of enslavement of reality to ideality, making me try to copy Marilyn Monroe’s face, for example the shapes of her eyes, eyelids, eyelashes, and eyebrows. On the contrary, the reason why

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<sup>14</sup> Here I am quoting the edition published in 2011: R. Scruton, *Beauty: a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

the beautiful feminine face represented in *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* is valuable to me is that it makes me *take care of my real face* through a sort of enslavement of ideality to reality. Indeed, to argue that beauty can be a surprisingly powerful symbol of the ideal human measure means to argue that it can make me try to find the ideal measure of *my* face (of its own identity), and not the ideal measure of Marilyn Monroe's (of its own identity). If it is true that the shapes of her eyes, eyelids, eyelashes, and eyebrows are beautiful thanks to the fact that the shapes of the first three features almost introduce the shape of the fourth, then it is also true that their beauty symbolizes what follows: if *my* eyes are big, then it is not likely that I will find their ideal measure, together with their beauty, in eyebrows as thin as Marilyn Monroe's, but in eyebrows continuous with *my* eyes, as indicated by the continuity of Marilyn Monroe's eyes with her eyebrows. Hence, I will take care of my real face and emphasize my eyebrows. It will be *my ideal measure*. I will be able to answer my first question: "What is beauty?". And, according to the answer which I have argued, I will be really beautiful.