

## BEAUTY, IS IT A NEED?

Ismini Patta (2006)

‘Man responds to the shape and surface and mass of things present to his senses. Certain arrangements in the proportion of the shape, mass and surface of things result in a pleasurable sensation, whilst the lack of such arrangement leads to indifference or even to positive discomfort and revulsion. The sense of pleasurable sensation is the sense of beauty’ says Herbert Read<sup>1</sup> in his book ‘the meaning of art’ (last edition 1954).

In other terms, accordingly to specialists, a beautiful thing is the one we consent to perceive with our senses.

The sense of beauty protects and enhances our senses, ugliness the opposite. In fact, we enjoy and think of any ‘sweet’ as nice. On the contrary, often a ‘bitter’ food prevents us from eating unhealthy subsistence. Any ‘loud’ noise is unhealthy to our ears and thus unpleasant. In the same way, ‘smooth’ protects the integrity of our skin; we like it. We accept to let the ‘beautiful’ reach our senses deeper and longer than the ‘indifferent’, much less the ‘ugly’.

But, not only the feeling of acceptance and senses’ excitement does contribute to make us feel more alive, but also affects our social life in a similar way. Beautiful people are considered to have easier access to social and job opportunities, as well as ‘beautiful’ works of art still attract audience despite the dispute brought about by some modern artistic movements.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Read: Professor and lecturer at the many universities such as Edinburgh, Cambridge, Harvard, and Leeds.

“I seek beauty” Zenovia confessed, a young self-taught painter, during the exhibition of Alpha Bank’s painting collection, at Benaki museum, on December 2005. “I look for beauty in arts, emotions, among people, décor, nature; I need it.”

Additionally, the beautiful object detracts our attention from the encountering reality, as it makes us concentrate on it; i.e. fixing our eyes. It is a situation of trans. To focus our attention on a point empties the mind from worryness and transposes our consciousness towards the observed thing. It is a process that eastern-philosophies practices put in light.

However, what we call ‘beautiful’ corresponds to different criteria from time to time and from one culture to another. For example, the contemporary western beauties have to be educated to win in important competitions; in old Japan culture a small sole of the foot was very appreciated, as well as a long neck in some Eastern (Massey) and South Africa tribes.

Moreover, in our society, we appreciate a face for instance, when additionally to its proportions, we also like the way that emotions and culture affect its expression and reflect the values of life we praise. Even moral values, such as ‘innocence’, influence our judgement upon its beauty. We perceive a blur entity of signs on a face, not a geometric analysis of his traits, as Impressionists made the point.

Similarly a beautiful piece of art reflects the cultural criteria we consider desirable.

This desirability depends on the dominant social mentality or the philosophical

principles we adopt to express our conception of the world. Marxism rejected the beauty conception of the 'bourgeoisie' and promoted the robust and vigorous aspect for the working-class aesthetics. Besides, during medieval times Christianity refuted secular beauty as a sin. Again, some movements in the contemporary history of art denied beauty as an old value. They tried to break from the past and overvalue the strong expression of emotions as a primordial characteristic.

On the contrary, the growing women's market – one of the specific 20<sup>th</sup> century traits- contributed largely not only to the defence of beauty, but also to turn it into an industry. In 2003, the company Estee Lauder had 21.000 employees. Women as consumers and labour force made beauty market a reportedly unsaturated one. Each year, in the United States, almost \$ 45 billion is spent on cosmetics and toiletries.

Nevertheless as David Hume wrote in his Essays, 'beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them' and it is within our lives.

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