



COURCHIA Jean-Paul

Art and brain: thinking beauty.

Topic: art and science

Courchia Jean Paul

Saint Joseph's Hospital, Dpt of Ophthalmology. Marseille. France

Sarah Guigui MD

Department of Internal Medicine, Mount Sinai Medical Center. Miami FL.

Benjamin Courchia MD

Department of Pediatrics, Jackson Memorial Hospital. Miami FL.

Emmanuel Courchia

Student

Abstract: Art and brain: thinking beauty

What is beauty? This notion is very subjective. Is beauty the representation of a beautiful thing or the representation of something beautiful? Asks Emmanuel Kant. As art evolves and beauty becomes superfluous, we will delve into the thought processes that trigger feelings of pleasure and happiness when glancing at a work of art. With the help of Emmanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, we attempt to understand the anatomy of beauty. Each of the aforementioned philosophers is unique in his view and understanding of beauty, and the feelings triggered in an individual because of being subjected to beautiful things. For Kant [1], our impression of beauty is governed by perceptions of morality, sensuality and rationality. Beauty appears through the prism of everyone's sensitivities and is, in essence, the product of positive feelings. Hegel, unlike Kant, thinks that beauty reveals truths and subconscious meanings vested in all us throughout time. For Hegel [2], man-made constructions, such as The Sphinx, are reminders that human civilization aspires to detach itself from nature. Art thus becomes superior, in a way, to nature because of this near spiritual undertone. Finally, Freud [3], understands human appreciation for beauty as an act of sublimation. Art allows the mind to let unacceptable thoughts that are to this point suppressed deeply into the subconscious, resurface in a socially acceptable manner. Beauty thus becomes the agent of a peaceful mediation between ego and superego.

Kant, Hegel and Freud seem to all agree that beauty is not imparted on us by art or any other medium; it is however the product of a personal energy triggered by an outside stimulus such as a work of art. In his book *When beauty saves us* [4], Charles Pépin expounds on this topic eloquently. It is thus up to us all to become the adjudicator on matters of beauty; and through introspection, discover if we belong to the Kantian, Hegelian or Freudian school of thought.

Courchia@numericable.fr

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Main References:

[1] Critique of the Power of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft) Immanuel Kant (1790).

[2] Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1998).

[3] Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Sigmund Freud (2008).

[4] Quand la beauté nous sauve. Charles Pépin (2014).

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Courchia Jean Paul, MD

Saint Joseph's Hospital, Dpt of Ophthalmology. Marseille. France

e-mail : courchia@numericable.fr

Guigui Sarah

Department of Internal Medicine, Mount Sinai medical center. Miami FL.

Courchia Benjamin

Department of Pediatrics, Jackson Memorial Hospital. Miami FL.

Courchia Emmanuel

Student

What is beauty? This notion is very subjective. Is beauty the representation of a beautiful thing or the representation of something beautiful? It is a paradox. Beauty is the intangible proof that can hardly be expressed. Everyone appreciates beauty but no one knows what it truly is. The words "it's beautiful" are often uttered with a universal undertone rarely considering the myriads of opinions on what makes something beautiful. We can say that beauty is proof without truth. Is beauty an intrinsic feature of a piece of music, a poem, a painting, or is solely the product of an effect operated by a subject on its viewer. Charles Beaudelaire 1868, oddly affirmed that "strangeness is a necessary ingredient in beauty" (*Curiosités Esthétiques, 1868*). When humans judge anything, scales are often involved. Is a thing valuable, is it moral, is it rational, is it sensual? This process is completely dismissed when assessing beauty; beauty is not scalable.

The aim of our presentation is to go beyond the definition of beauty and investigate the effect of beauty on its subject. This work is strongly inspired by Charles Pepin's magnificent book: *When beauty saves us* (Robert Laffont – 2013), where he explores the notion of beauty as it was understood by the philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831) and Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939).

For Kant [1], our impression of beauty is governed by perceptions of morality, sensuality and rationality. Beauty appears through the prism of everyone's sensitivities and is, in essence, the product of positive feelings. In the *Critique of the Power of judgment*, Kant introduces the concept of "free play" of human cognitive faculties (understanding and imagination). He says in the *Conflict of the Faculties* that "the greatness of man was inseparable from this struggle, in him, between his different faculties." For Kant, rationalism rules, at all times, over imagination. Beauty can only be imparted on someone who finds harmony between rationalism and imagination, at which point internal conflicts between internal forces is dissolved. Finally, Kant adds three criteria to his definition of beauty; it must be without interest, without concept and without purpose.

Hegel, on the other hand, thinks beauty reveals truths and subconscious meanings vested in all us throughout time. For Hegel [2], man-made constructions, such as The Sphinx, are reminders that human civilization aspires to detach itself from nature. To be sensitive to the beauty of the sphinx is to adhere to the idea that every culture aspires to tear itself away from nature. Art thus becomes superior, in a way, to nature because of this near spiritual undertone. Through the example of the Apollo, we understand that Greek statues are not only beautiful forms, they embody Greek principles: philosophy and democracy. For Hegel, the meaning of beauty is revealed by the symbols buried or purposefully omitted from a work of art. “A symbol is always the presence of an absence” says Charles Pepin [4]. The talent of the artist is to find a good balance between the presence and the absence.

Finally, Freud [3], understands human appreciation for beauty as an act of sublimation. Art allows the mind to let unacceptable thoughts that are to this point suppressed deeply into the subconscious, resurface in a socially acceptable manner. Beauty thus becomes the agent of a peaceful mediation between ego and superego. Facing a work of art, in the spirit of sublimation, the spectator finds the common point with the artist, not his talent but the origin of this one, his impulses repressed.

As art evolves and beauty becomes superfluous it is thus up to us all to become the adjudicator on matters of beauty; and through introspection, discover if we belong to the Kantian, Hegelian or Freudian school of thought.

[1] Critique of the Power of judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft) Immanuel Kant (1790).

[2] Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1998).

[3] Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Sigmund Freud (2008).

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