

The (in)quiet state

'Inquietum est cor nostrum'
St. Augustine, Confessions

When the right of beauty is claimed by products, models and socio-economic tendencies, when the thin chant of beauty seems to be shouted out by everything except by what it has been historically dedicated to – art – some questions naturally arise.

The first question, which indeed requires a certain bravery, asks if our time is 'an age with plebeian tastes'¹. The only possible answer is yes. Never before was an age so plebeian in its tastes, in its culture, never before did 'plebeian' lack a completely negative connotation.

Popular culture has become an integral part of the contemporary cultural horizon. The rise of so-called mass culture is leading to a tangible equalization of all cultural phenomena and to a dangerous sameness of their substantial value². On one side it has undoubtedly brought rich contributions. On the other it is time to make a choice, distinguishing between what is shared and what simply has low value.

The second question concerns the concept of beauty. Is it right to castle in a selective defense of this concept, without acknowledging its concrete alteration, its drastic evolution?

It is impossible to ignore the indiscriminate spreading of the concept of beauty in every field and its effective transformation. Beauty has become of common use, and absolutely central in phenomena such advertising, design, industrial products, systems and events. It has gone along a way far from the ancient aesthetic concept, which was present at its highest grade in nature and in artistic expression. There is an urgent need to reformulate the concept of beauty since the more ubiquitous it becomes, the more it turns out debased and inconsistent.

There is a common use of the term which is highly ambiguous. It suggests the key for a new interpretation: make use of beauty. In this beauty is 'objectified'; first thought of as an intrinsic, intentional quality, but then seen as an applicable value. There is the breaking point, the moment of crisis.

¹ F. W. Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil*, 1886

² 'Why has the intellectual community traditionally had a strong opposition to popular culture?' That was a phenomenon of the 1950s and early '60s. Then the landscape changed a lot. My generation was the first to take pop culture into serious consideration. Now I'm sometimes under the impression that intellectuals are too concerned with popular culture. As soon as you learn about low culture, you become so fascinated by it that you become a member of the sect.
10 Questions: Umberto Eco, *Time Magazine*, Nov. 28, 2007

This objectification – which considers beauty to be nothing more than a quality given a priori, instead of a discovery, unveiling itself – does not involve a concept of ‘absolute’ beauty, although that is always naïvely implied, but rather the great phenomenon of mass-culture, the aesthetic revolution of our time: the concept of taste.

We commonly judge as ‘beautiful’ that which adequately corresponds to a model, or matches a model, or tries to create a new one. In a time in which information sharing and globalization – in terms of a planetary resonance of events and socio-cultural phenomena – represent the absolute normality, the concept of taste becomes social, shared, oscillatory and surprisingly complex. In fact, in spite of the enormous number of factors, taste is usually unbelievably aligned: it is usually common.

Under some aspects, like the economy’s fate is determined by the ‘market’, the concept of beauty stands in a context which sets its value, in the terms of a taste that is constantly redefined. In this sense our taste is plebeian, properly in the acceptance of communis. Taste becomes beauty in its own correspondence. It is, according to Gadamer³, a moment of social generalization, which creates rules for everyone’s behavior and – following the paradigm of fashion – rendering beauty a social dependence.

Historically, taste corresponds to the consent of an ideal community, and the revolution of our age has been to make this community potentially boundless. We cannot say that it is a democratic system, in an egalitarian sense, but rather a form of fluid interdependence between social generalization and its own canonization.

This concept of contemporary beauty can be seen in design, fashion, advertising, corresponding to the general model, while at the same time contributing to its creation.

Consider the case of ‘timeless beauty’ in design objects. These are always iconic creations, representative of a probably perfect concurrence to an ideal model of beauty, at a precise moment of time⁴. This model, in every ‘new époque’, (we are talking about periods of some decades) retraces its own aesthetic definition in new taste relationship with the present.

Is there really a difference?

Was there ever a sense of beauty different from the coincidence with taste? Or is the only difference with the past the monstrous acceleration of our times and the

³ H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1960

⁴ The modernist diktat is in fact a new definition of taste, and consequently of ‘beauty’. Carrying out a function and making it evident was not only a duty, but by no means also the true sense of ‘beauty’ of an object or an architecture.

extension of our social base? Is it a real evolution, a change, or just a nostalgic idea?

As 'an-aesthetic' moves us away from perception, from feeling (αἰσθάνομαι), so 'aesthetic' is the moment of highest presence, of maximum foreboding (prae-sentio) of one's own existence in the effort of making it significant. Therefore beauty, aesthetically conceived, has to be searched on a different level than taste.

In order to give an appropriate answer it is necessary to carry out an analysis of what our culture is becoming and where it is moving through silent and intense currents. The progressive 'disposal' of beauty from the figurative experience of art – as if art shrinks to become something perceived as predictable, easy and common – is a clue of a deep change in the cultural horizon. A gradual process – apparently inexorable – seems to have proceeded to the destruction of all the obstacles that thought placed in order to avoid the reading of a cultural phenomenon as a purely socio-economic product in a historical conjunction. From religion to metaphysics, there has been a general tendency to debase every content not strictly immanent in thought and cultural production.

The so-called western 'common culture' seems to have carried out a sort of intellectual negationism in the name of a claimed progress, sometimes even venturing into a substantially barren desert.

What is created today is always a 'cultural product' – 'product' not in the original sense of 'pro-duco', 'to draw out', but instead 'to alienate', acceptance gained from a consumerism for its own sake. What 'mass culture' tends to be, in essence, is a purely immanent reading - in its own way consumeristic - of a cultural event.

If culture only signifies within its relationships with other cultural events in the past, in the present or in the future, it tends to transform in a sterile semiotic form of denotative and connotative interpretation, denying any redemptive, atemporal, 'absolute' possibility, which is proper of aesthetic experience. From this point of view culture becomes by no means a demission of the proper sense of being human.

What is likely to be ostracized from the cultural horizon and the civilization process is the true, deep meaning of existence itself, its sacred Vestal fire: questioning.

Culture arises from human questioning: it is the last grasp on the edge of Being, in the stupefying tragedy of self-perception. The sense of art, in the past centered on beauty, today tends to vanish. It seems to become pure contestation, reflection or realization within a self-limited horizon, with the risk of excluding everything that is not a meta-language⁵, that is not talking about itself. The risk, thus, is that culture becomes involutive, as it allows itself only self-reference. The 'liquid' society risks

⁵ Jakobson, *Selected Writings* 1972

to produce a sterile culture, deaf to its origins and incapable to ask questions that can give an horizon to existence.

The priority of aesthetic experience therefore is not its consonance to an ever-changing model, but an attempt to make the plurality of Being acceptable to man. This is also the reason why religions have always eventuated in beauty. Beauty therefore has the nature of questioning, not answering, and its declension is found in a renewed μέθεξις, that is participation to the eventuating of Being. In a constant flow, the search for beauty seems to have passed through paths sometimes hard to follow, far from western contemporary ideas of well-being, of comfort, ease, and serene self-flattery.

In the 'Evening Land', culture took its first steps with the acknowledgment of necessity and duplicity⁶, and it evolved into a criterion of beauty that was fearful: the momentary loss of one's own self⁷ – close to the beauty of nature – bringing man to the edge of a new perspective on the world.

Insofar as it is a question and not an answer, beauty becomes the incomprehensible distillate of existence, its cipher, the scary and tragic beauty of accepting the totality of being alive. This is a beauty that has nothing simple, nothing momentary, nothing easy. It is a flower rooted in the suffering of the world, which tries to bring man to confront of the measure of his own humanity. Originating in a social, economic, historic moment, beauty becomes experiencing the exit of the significance from bare immanency, following true human instinct. Since man is human when he questions, a perspective which negates the questioning becomes in-existent⁸, insofar as it is not conscious of itself.

In a time when design – both 'product' and 'information' – in its most experimental forms has a tendency to escape from its historical limitation – serial/mass production, close relationship with market, the imperative of a practical function – striving for its own disciplinary maturity, it becomes impossible to ignore the dimension of questioning.

A design practice in the name of beauty therefore needs to confront the nature of man. Distancing itself from the general cultural self-reference and bravely choosing to focus on the problematicity of existence itself, design can discover a real aesthetic dimension within the human need of being in-quiet.

⁶ Anaximander, Fr. 12B1, “ ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν· δίδοναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοισι τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν. ”

⁷ Longinus, *On the sublime*

⁸ Jaspers, Karl, *Existenzphilosophie*, 1938

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