

Reflections about

“Beauty”

by

James Kirwan

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Introduction

In my work of art I have always been interested in expressing 'beauty' and 'contemplation' through creating images from the nature. For the purpose of understanding the concept of beauty, and what it means to my work and me I have chosen the book "Beauty" by James Kirwan. The intention is that this book will benefit my basic knowledge in the subject, and thoroughly understand the concept of beauty in relation to history and to the present time.

The first analyses of beauty date to our Classical forebears – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who formulated the basis of our western understanding of the elusive concept of beauty. The ancient's attempts to define beauty, to give it lasting and tangible form and value, have changed the western conception and at times it has become impossible to appreciate ideals of which seems appropriate to the present age.

Recently the concept of beauty has been a topic of exceptional interest in the contemporary art world since the publication in 1993 of Dave Hickey's "*The Invisible Dragon. Four Essays on Beauty*".

Although James Kirwan is not placing his work in relation to any contemporary debate, nevertheless I believe his recent publication of the book "Beauty" in 1999 provides refreshing philosophical link to our present understanding on the subject of beauty. According to Kirwan there are three theories that are in effect. The first, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, which he believes is not a theory, second, the synaesthetic in its various form which he does not find convincing and the third is the Neoplatonic theory based on premises, and proceeds by method

James Kirwan, Beauty - a Summary

In his book he clearly examines the concept of beauty within historical philosophical ('aesthetic') context, seeking for an answer to what beauty is. And the answer, finally he arrives at by placing the responsibility firmly with the eye of the beholder and explains what it is in this 'eye' that gives rise to beauty.

Kirwan believes that the 'beautiful object' is really only one element, necessary but not sufficient. His first enquiry, then, which properties are both necessary and sufficient for any given object to be beautiful, and what qualities in the perceivers qualify or disqualify them from discerning these beautiful properties. He is concerned with not the objective qualities of the beautiful, but rather the dynamics of the event of beauty. As Kantians, the modern definition of 'beauty' confines itself to a characterization of the purely phenomenal aspect of beauty, without asserting anything about its ground. Beauty according to this characterization, is that quality we consider appropriate to whatever pleases immediately, that is pleases it self, irrespective of any concept of, or interest in, the object to which it is attributed leading to sensation. Problem arises then, to judge the authenticity of a reaction and to prove that the subject feels a desire in connection with association that is itself submissive to satisfaction by the object designated 'beautiful' by that subject. Once we allowed that beauty both appears as the quality of an object and yet is necessarily subjective, that beauty is both state and act.

Kirwan's intention then is to examine what is meant by 'eye' in the history of beauty. He refers to the eighteen-century when the differences in taste begin to become a problem for the notion of beauty leading to the concept of 'good taste' and 'bad taste' and, therefore, the 'improvement of the taste; that is, the 'really' and 'apparently' beautiful. This concept of standard of taste, Kirwan believes is misleading. The idea that I-know-not-what leading

to the question what is the 'eye' in the Pythagorean idea, of proportion and measure, form, order and also as rhythm, is not only quantitative but also qualitative, that is, certain relation between thing and soul; metaphysical and transcended harmony. For in all eyes is the eye of the soul. But the theory of beauty in proportion describes of how a thing is beautiful, not why it is beautiful. It is according to Kirwan, the lack of coherent metaphysics in the notion of objectivity of the beautiful, which brings about the termination of 'beauty itself'. But metaphysical is still as present in everyday mind as it ever was. Kirwan writes that beauty "cannot exist for us in a separate state, in the manner of concept, which we may choose to apply, is all that its attribution to the 'eye' can meaningfully signify" (p. 26).

Beauty within the concept of proportion, according to Kirwan then doesn't explain the meaning of eye, and therefore cannot be a theory.

Kirwan believes that the significant piece of psychological data for the examination of the nature of beauty, is to find how the notion of form invested with beauty during the ancient and medieval period which is the divine origin of beauty, - the apparent attribution of beauty directly to form, and to understand the implications of the belief in such origin.

He demonstrates his firm belief in the objectivity of beauty on ancient philosophy coming closer to discovering the identity of eye, is the absolute, the God. It is based on Neoplatonist theory that was extremely influenced by the Christian world, which is the rejection of symmetry, beauty in things for which there is no standard of measurement and describes beauty as reflection and manifestation of God. But this definition of beauty itself, the God, is beyond comprehension. According to Kirwan, none of the writers makes the idea of beauty so important. Neoplatonist beauty in phenomenal world is at once a state and act. Kirwan transcribes its significant element into new significance, transposes its meaning to his own understanding by concentrating on the concept from beauty to

beautiful and from absolute to the phenomenon by demonstrating that contemplate beauty through beautiful without realizing that we never left the phenomenon. Which is also the sign, image, trace, or reflection of the highest beauty. Neoplatonic conception of the absolute is then transcendence of what is transcended. This concept was grounded in faith by the truth about the psychology or phenomenology of beauty suppressed by the idea of beauty being product of eye.

Pleasure in beauty, which leading to the concept of 'yearning', is a state of mind that conveys static aspiration. It brings back the concept of existence of metaphysic as result of desire, which exists by virtue of the impossibility and appears at a point of greatest contrast between desire and impossibility. Kirwan draws attention to the parallel, which can be made, between significantlessness and to those contradictory emotion such as, pleasure, passion, sentiment and so on. He believes that the feeling of beauty is the constitution of human tendencies, which accounts for the 'yearning without object'. It is entertainment of idea that constitutes the beauty of an object. Beauty then as Kirwan states, "preservation of desire in the face of rationality, a holding fast to what exist only in its slipping away" (p. 49). The phenomenal ground remains concealed because desire is bound to knowledge and emerges wonder, longing, and regret- as beauty. And it is this phenomenal ground, the desirable impossibility gives rise to instance of beauty.

He further deals with the second synaesthetic theory of beauty based on Neoplatonism and Christian writers; beauty as cognition and discusses its relation to knowledge, to interest, to morality, and to art. Which is also the cause of impossible desire. Beauty in relation to knowledge is by means of growing skepticism, as it can be demonstrated by child's greater capacity for entertaining impossibility as possibilities while remaining aware of their impossibilities; a capacity entirely grounded by ignorance. Consequently, increase in knowledge reduces the range of possible instance of beauty. So, here he emphasizes the

heart of the subject in this book, that is, the confounding of phenomenality with emotion which beauty appears to be or not to be. According to Kirwan, all earlier assertion accounts for value, that doesn't adequately account for what is felt in beauty. He makes a point, that apprehension of transcendental knowledge in these theories corresponds the phenomenology of beauty, which again brings back the term metaphysic, and to 'disinterested contemplation'. But this, to Kirwan, does not explain why it gives pleasure. He believes beauty is neither action nor desire, yet, it feels some way revelatory, and yet a distraction, which is also the concept of Neoplatonism and the Christian writer. So, he peruses the relationship between beauty and cognition where beauty, not a source of knowledge, is nevertheless, the source of knowing, which leads to questioning traditional antithesis beauty and use. For Ficino, identifies an object as soul and Heidegger as being. It is Ficino, who he believes provides the point. Beauty is a sign of prevailing course of being, which lies at the heart of metaphysics. It lies at the heart of all desire for knowledge and believe that is caused by the desire for beauty pointing to the origin of knowledge in desire.

Kirwan then reasons why action towards beautiful appear, and whether one can actually possess beauty. Action belongs to beauty and to go deeper to beauty appears only going beyond beauty, that is, leaving of beauty. Passion, which is an irrational action towards beauty, is also marked by same objective meaninglessness and in which he finds no goal in explaining the appearance of it. It is rather he assures, the timelessness, the "object of yearning" which is a subjective response. Thus beautiful object appears as itself the object of transcendental desire. Kirwan emphasizes that on a object that we experience as beautiful, is our simultaneous consciousness of both the desirability of vanishing point of desire and its impossibility. The phenomenal condition of a instance, from his own experience, action is already part of the ground of that object. So blood and light deference

to necessity and limitlessness desire must then be mixed in our soul which act of beauty appears. Beauty can only be in the phenomenal desire and impossibility and that is why one cannot possess beauty.

Kirwan believes that the nature of beauty and morality is misunderstood. And shows evidence against a direct link between beauty and any particular morality within phenomenological characterization of beauty. However, intersubjective, that is, uniformity of taste continuity leads one to believe that beauty is an expression of our deepest value, encouraging us to create hierarchies of beauty, to reify objects of bad and good taste. Kirwan here as a moralist finds difficulty distinguishing the grounds of morality from taste, which gives rise to taste itself into moral hierarchy. As for Neoplatonist, a heavenly and vulgar venus; longing and lust, is a matter of arrested development in the process that would lead to beauty. Whereas for modern aesthetic, it is a matter of what is, and what is not, perfectly beautiful, that is, the purity of either 'judgment' or 'perception'. An important point he observes that within the religious sphere, the notion of hierarchy of beauty where the fundamental division of taste lies between form and not form; spiritual and temporal; ascending beauty and descending beauty, does however appear to find support once we begin to confuse the beautiful with a range of effect that can come under the leading of aesthetic.

This leads to our concept of morality and value. He connects beauty and ideology with the world as its own cause of vanishing and reappearance of the world through attraction of taste, in which world itself metaphysic. According to Kirwan nothing is held up as desirable, except in terms of its desirability, which's to make no claim about the relative value of ethic.

Kirwan uses 'aesthetic' to mean 'the philosophy of art' one that seems justified by the context. He criticizes for modern aesthete for institutionalizing the definition of art and for

not being clear about the concept of "beauty". The fate of beauty within contemporary 'aesthetics'-the philosophy of art; 'beauty' rarely been used to stand for its merits, other than beauty, outside the realm. Classification of beauty as aesthetic is a potential confusion because beauty and aesthetic share the same metaphysical structure. Kirwan objects Kants notion of "free" and "dependent beauty" and demonstrate by questioning "how many people, even among of Duchump's work, would....*Fountain* a work of art because every time they saw it they are struck by its beauty?" (p. 115). Beautiful appears disinterest, in this case, soon as the object of text made autonomous in coming from outside, equal to life. An idea somehow justifies our pleasure or admiration, and may assert a necessary connection to both beauty and aesthetic, yet, as with beauty, we can ultimately point neither to an objective principle, nor to the satisfaction of a universally intersubjective desire, that would establish such necessity. So, he finds that it is not possible to identify "beauty" with aesthetic.

After analyzing the definition of beauty within the theoretical and philosophical context, Kirwan finds that action belongs inevitably to beauty, which cannot be prevented by any analysis. It is important to know for Kirwan that there is no such thing as "in beauty" and "behind beauty". To seek beyond beauty (as aesthetic) is practice, is matter of notional assent to the beautiful, a matter of cultivation. Where there is beauty there is a compromise of the intellect. And as Kirwan writes that " Given that all the action that belongs essentially to beauty is already contained, and inevitably contained, within the manifestation of beauty, must be that there is no consequences, that my analysis has no pragmatic value whatsoever." (p. 121). He then concludes with that " I have described beauty, and told how the beauty of a thing is always access to anything we can hope from that thing, but there will still be beauty, for there is nothing beyond beauty. Everything is as it was. I have noting to prescribe." (p. 121)

Discussion

Kirwan wants to understand beauty truly and fully. He characterises his task with "How can we account for what is experienced by the subject as a disinterested pleasure of the kind beauty appears to be?" . His book is about beauty - not aesthetics, not art. Within this scope James Kirwan offers a new and persuasive answer to the age old question of what beauty is, placing the responsibility for beauty firmly in the eye of the beholder, explaining what it is in this "eye" that gives rise to beauty. Kirwan approach the subject of beauty in a radical, and yet still reactionary way seeking revival of Platonic beauty. Radical, in the sense that he is analysing beauty not within the common contemporary framework, and reactionary, since he is not willing to take into account the recent debate - he debates discussions from before and after Christ, but little related to our recent times. The association of beauty with "disinterested pleasure" is also traditional, and what it indicates is that the experience of beauty is not sought for the sake of something else, but rather because the experience itself is intrinsically satisfying. Still the book is full of fresh ideas. And one extremely important feature of the book is that it demonstrates that it is possible to pursue beauty intellectual without losing it. The book is designed and produced as a typical, though attractive, university press book with a wealth of historical information about the progress of the notion of "beauty". At times so much information that Kirwan`s reasoning is sometimes difficult to follow.

Beauty is for Kirwan wholly subjective, in fact is not a property of an object but of we who behold the object. It is a pleasure rather than an aspect of the things that give rise to pleasure. One objection to this position, to which Kirwan gives no shrift at all, is that it violates the elementary grammar of the term "beauty." Beauty is a quality of flowers and movie stars, but to say that it is a pleasure just seems an error in usage. Yet in such

contexts as the world "beautiful" occurs there is usually little obvious indication that what the speaker is seeking to describe is an internal state. "It looks beautiful to me" is a phrase that only occurs when the speaker is in retreat before some dissension. That this should be so is indeed strange, and shows a paradox within the common sense attitude towards the concept, for, while the beholder will talk as if beauty were an objective category they will also insist, in argument that it is a purely subjective one.

But what is really a problem for Kirwan's account is how the subjectivity of beauty comports with his Neo-Platonic proclivities. If beauty is all in the head, then it cannot connect us with something greater than ourselves. If beauty is our sense of "the absolute in the finite and the finite in the absolute," then either 'the absolute' is itself subjective or else beauty is a delusion. But of course Plato conceived of the absolute as a supernal objective realm of Truth, what is known as "Platonic heaven." For Kirwan, then, beauty takes on the deepest sort of poignancy: it is the yearning that literally could never by definition be fulfilled, because it is a yearning for what we cannot believe exists but what we can never stop wanting. As Kirwan asks, "What is to be done with this new-found knowledge that in beauty, behind beauty, is nothing, the abyss, dust?" Beauty becomes for Kirwan a sign of the human condition or the human predicament: we need to know God but there is no God; we need to know the Truth but there is no Truth.

For Kirwan beauty lies at the heart of human values, "All values are ultimately rooted in beauty, in the sense that they finally rely upon what is desired for its own sake, what is absolutely, and therefore impossibly, desired" (p. 78). This must be interpreted, as all human values are entirely subjective and also finally delusory because they aspire to an objectivity and transcendence that is not offered to us in reality.

Kirwan seems to be torn between a beautiful vision of beauty and the attempt to give it what would count today as a respectable philosophical account of the concept. "Beauty is

neither euphoria nor communicable knowledge . . . ; it is rather an unconscious sense of the prevailing course of our life, our relation to the world we are passing through - a sense of our ultimate goal and of its ideality, of the absolute in the finite and the finite in the absolute, desire and the impossibility of its fulfilment" (p. 63).

That is a lovely rendition of a Neo-Platonic aesthetic, and Kirwan connects his account very richly to that tradition. Not the least of Kirwan's contributions is to show the development of the Western concept of beauty in a clear but nuanced way, and then to contribute to that development to an extent unprecedented since George Santayana's *Sense of Beauty*, published in 1896. Beauty is where we are all headed, is the absolute inherent in the real, and is a path to transcendence. But the very odd thing about the situation that Kirwan finds himself is that words like "the absolute" seem in our post-metaphysical era to have no sense. Kirwan leads us into the huge if somewhat elusive beauty of metaphysical truth. This metaphysical conception of beauty in philosophy has been out of fashion for a very long time. That is in part because not only metaphysics but also beauty itself has come to seem passe during the last hundred years. Modern art seems to have ditched or at any rate decentralised beauty as an aesthetic value. Even if ".....the subject of beauty and the subject of art are not the same thing" it would be enlightening if Kirwan had discussed, like he does with aesthetics, how his concept of beauty relates to modern and contemporary art. Does our misconceptions of art and beauty, arise from a lack of consistency in the use of the words art and beauty? Picasso's unconventional and often-violent treatment of the human body e.g. was often interpreted as an "insult" to beauty. For Picasso the absolute beauty of western art was sterile, and early he looked for inspiration in other cultures. If Kirwan had not only based his analysis on European tradition and culture, but also included elements of analysis of beauty from other cultures like from Africa, Asia, China and South America, his analysis and conclusion would have been more valuable in

our global world. Even in country as western as America there is a discussion about the weight of European culture, like Barnett Newman in his essay "The Sublime is Now"¹.

Another point of dispute is Kirwan's statement: "that beauty belongs, nominally, to aesthetics, yet aesthetics has disowned it - it will not be necessary (to place) my work in relation to the contemporary debate on its subject. There is no contemporary debate on its subject." But, as earlier mentioned, the concept of beauty has been a topic of exceptional interest in the contemporary art world since the publication in 1993 of Dave Hickey's "The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty"². For Hickey, beauty is "the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder – by showing us something we may not approve in such a way that we cannot resist it". The evocation of pleasure through discomfort is, in his view, a deliberate form of transgression, and beauty will, in the coming years, not be "an attribute of objects but a pattern of response".

The last decades of the twentieth century have been marked by an apparent shift from formalism – characterised by Frank Stella's "what-you-see-is-what-you-see"³ approach – toward an art with a near total reliance on content. In an art world increasingly focused on global issues and social concerns, artists and critics alike have questioned beauty's efficacy and relevance for contemporary culture. Some would vindicate the view that art should be disturbing, outrageous, incomprehensible, ambiguous, vicious, corrosive, but it should assuredly not be pleasant, the pleasure of beauty deeply suspect.

As contemporary writer Majorie Welish has observed, "beauty" in our time "has to come to mean nothing – or everything"⁴.

¹ Originally published in *Tiger's Eye*, vol. 1, no. 6, December 1948, pp 51-3

² Hickey, Dave, "Invisible Dragon. Four Essays on Beauty.", *Art issues*. Press 1993

³ Stella, quoted in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" *Art News* 65, no. 5 (September 1966): 55-61.

⁴ Marjorie Welish, "Contratemplates," *bill Beckley and David Shapiro, eds., Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (New York: Allworth Press 1998), 61

In the book "Regarding Beauty"⁵ the focus is also if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or does it instead reside within the limits of the object, as well as objectivity and subjectivity. And what about Kirwan's "beauty" and the contemporary Sublime?

It would have been interesting to have Kirwan's own analysis of his view of beauty related to the contemporary debate, an important debate that not be overruled by "There is no contemporary debate on its subject", even if Kirwan's book ".. is not a book about philosophy of art."

Being concerned about beauty, both artistically and intellectually, James Kirwan's "Beauty" gives a thorough analysis of the European tradition of beauty with an intriguing conclusion. The book, as well as other relevant literature, has made it clear that the subject of beauty is more elaborate than originally thought with different views and definitions of beauty, beautiful, sublime and aesthetics. As well as beauty's relation, or not, to art in general and contemporary art specifically. Discussing James Kirwan's Beauty has been clarifying, as well as terrifying, beauty being a significant part of my dissertation, as well as my work.

Conclusion

Philosophers and critics, even until today, constantly find their self with ways to their theories, views, analysis and endless opinions regarding the subject of beauty, in one form or another with plentiful confusions and dilemmas, or even with no definition as James Kirwan himself. Nevertheless, by doing what they do with the word 'beauty' what ever way, in my opinion, gives them spiritual joy and pleasure leading to the beauty; that is, 'yearning without object', which is what Kirwan transcribed in his book and for whom I support most. He makes a sincere effort to bring back our basic common sense along with

⁵ Benezra, Neal & Viso, Olga M., "Regarding Beauty. A view of the late twentieth Century" Smithsonian

the platonic concept to live. In my opinion, what ever way one wish to form beauty or possess beauty (or not), in our time, beauty will still end up in the endless circle of our spirituality because, that is the power of beauty, and is the only and truly one can have.

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