

Reinvigorating Beauty Symposium

Beauty 2.0

The Reappraisal of Late 19th-century Academic Painting on the Internet

Merlijn Schoonenboom

For nearly a century, late 19th-century academic painters such as Bouguereau, Gérôme or Alma Tadema have been reviled as the 'reactionaries' of art history, but they are back in the spotlight. This is not only shown by an increasing number of exhibitions, but also by many blogs, online references, and samples in current visual culture. The reason is exactly the 'anti-modern' reputation of these painters. Like the Impressionists, they wanted to formulate an answer to the rapid changes of their time, but they chose not to reject the tradition of classical beauty, but to exaggerate it. They thus became the producers of a dream factory of voluptuous nymphs, sweet fairies and brave knights, instead of 'unmask' this beauty as a 'bourgeois lie', as the modernists did.

The internet plays a decisive role in the reappraisal of this aesthetic. Firstly, fan-based websites promote themselves as a kind of democratic 'museum', not controlled by art historical preferences. The academic painters are heralded here as the last defenders of classical beauty, and used as an argument against today's supposedly 'elitist' art world, which only brought 'ugliness' to the world. Secondly, the 19th-century painters match the current visual culture surprisingly well. Their aesthetic lived on in multiple popular culture forms of the 20th century, from the first *Playboy* to early Hollywood, and is now noticeable in the popularity of fantasy, polished eroticism and a penchant for sentiment in the visual culture of the digital age. The 'official' art world on the other hand, much more interested in popular aesthetics than half a century ago, appreciates this as a kind of 'missing link' between contemporary pop culture and the lost classical tradition.

Perception, action, and sense making

The three realms of the aesthetic

Barend van Heusden

In common parlance, the term 'beauty' seems to have at least three different meanings. It can, firstly, refer to a positive experience in relation to what is *perceived* (e.g. the beauty of a landscape, face, or artefact). A second concept of beauty is the expression of a positive experience in relation to an intentional *action* – something is well-done, skillfully executed, shows craftsmanship (e.g. the beauty of an athlete's performance, or the working of a piece of machinery). A third use of the term serves the expression of a positive experience in relation to a *sense making* process (e.g. the beauty of a work of art or a scientific paper).

Each of these three concepts of beauty comes with a positive value which, from an evolutionary perspective, can be taken as an indication that the perception, the (imagined) action, and/or the sense making process that is qualified as beautiful contributes to the homeostasis, the equilibrium of the experiencing individual – the sense of beauty being an expression of (hormonal) well-being, of feeling safe and in control.

In my presentation, I will argue that these three concepts of beauty reflect evolutionary layers of the human organism, conceived as a system interacting with, and in an environment: the innate (perceptual beauty), the learned (craftsmanship, the 'artful'), and the cultural or *sense making* (the artistic). The three layers build cumulatively upon each other: sense making presupposes learning, and learning builds upon perception. This might explain why, in humans, perceptual beauty criteria tend to be more universal than criteria underlying judgements of skillfulness, whereas the latter are more easily shared than judgements about art.

Beauty and Objectivity

Daan Evers

Both Hume and Kant suggest that judgements of beauty are based on pleasurable responses. But many aestheticians, including Hume and Kant, also think that judgements of beauty appear to us as universally or objectively correct. They attempt to reconcile the subjective basis of judgements of beauty with their objective validity. The success of these attempts depends on dubious assumptions about the constitution and functioning of human cognitive and affective capacities. Should we therefore abandon the idea that beauty is a matter of pleasurable responses? In this presentation, I will explain some of the reasons for thinking that beauty is independent of subjective responses and discuss some objections to this idea.

Human Beauty, Invigorated Beauty

Lisa Schmalzried

Human beauty is a much-discussed and controversial societal topic as our society seems to obsess over beautiful people and the pursuit of personal beauty. However, at best, it is a marginal topic in contemporary philosophy. To be fair, philosophers also have not talked much about other kinds of beauty in recent years, either. Many have become critical of the aesthetic silence about beauty, however. The call is getting louder that we should revive the aesthetic debate about beauty. I echo this call and suggest revigorating the aesthetic discussion of beauty by focusing on human beauty. I want to counteract the asymmetry of attention paid to human beauty within and outside the aesthetic debate.

Additionally, human beauty deserves a separate and special consideration because human beings as aesthetic objects are peculiar compared to other types of aesthetic objects. First, human beings are considered as aesthetic objects by other human beings. Aesthetic judges and the objects of their judgement thus belong to the same species and therefore regard each other as social counterparts. Secondly, human beings are invigorated aesthetic objects which constantly change their appearance. With these peculiarities in mind, I argue for a characterological theory understanding human beauty as sense-perceptible amiability: for human beauty, physical beauty and the sensually perceptible, body-bound expression of inner beauty, understood as relationally relevant virtuousness, should come together. This characterological theory suggests that human beauty is a specific kind of beauty different from other kinds of beauty, like artistic or natural beauty.

The Expanding Beauty Regime and Its Consequences: or: How It Became so Important to be Beautiful

Giselinde Kuipers

In contemporary societies, physical appearance is more important to more people than ever before. This paper sketches the expansion of this contemporary beauty regime. Drawing mainly on European data, I argue that since the late 1800s, as a result of expanding media and consumer cultures, social democratization, a shift to a service-based economy, and the rise of new media, the societal importance of appearance grew. People came to have more developed and diverse tastes in human beauty, and more opportunities to cultivate their appearance. Consequently, it became more important to be beautiful, for men and women, across the life course, in more domains of

life. Drawing on the process sociological tradition inspired by Weber and Elias, I interpret this gradual raising of cultural standards as the emergence of a *beauty regime* involving new (1.) standards for social control and self-control; (2.) standards for moral and aesthetic evaluation and (3.) standards for social worth and self-worth. Like other regimes, the beauty regime is demanding and constraining for individuals, but contributes to the emergence of durable social constellations that people might consider progress. The beauty regime makes appearance more central to many domains of life, and thus more consequential for identities and inequalities, self-worth and social worth. In conclusion, I will explore some of these consequences, with a particular focus how the beauty regimes re/shapes social inequalities in contemporary societies around the world.

How does beauty feel? Exploring profiles of emotions elicited by beautiful nature, arts, design, social events, and persons

Ines Schindler

For Kant, the “feeling of beauty” was the prime desideratum of aesthetics. His expression “the feeling of beauty” emphasizes that perceiving beauty always involves a subjective feeling dimension. This study explored how beauty actually feels. We investigated whether the feeling of beauty is characterized by one prototypical emotion profile or rather two or more different emotion profiles, which might, for instance, characterize natural versus artistic beauty. Participants ($N = 797$) described a particularly beautiful experience of their own choice and provided ratings of their aesthetic emotions during this experience. Experiences from various domains were named and sorted into the categories nature, arts, design, social events, and persons. We ran a series of mixture models (latent profile analyses, multivariate normal mixture models, and factor mixture models) to search for latent classes of the feeling of beauty. The sample was divided into two halves to investigate the replicability of our findings. Across models and sample halves, we consistently identified two latent classes that differed with regard to the experience of negative emotions during an experience of beauty. Participants in both classes 1 and 2 reported pleasing, moving, and captivating emotions, but participants in class 2 (approximately 8% of the sample) also reported sadness, confusion, and fear. This co-presence of negative emotions in class 2, however, did not translate into increased levels of aversion. While class 2 featured fewer experiences of nature and slightly more experiences of the arts, the findings overall suggest that beauty feels similar for most people and across domains.

A Beautiful Gesture

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

In his poetically titled article “From the North with my cello, or, five propositions on beauty” (Bunn ed., *Anthropology and Beauty*, London 2018), the anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that beauty is not an attribute of objects, subjects, or places, but an element of or rather within the becoming of things, to which we relate by (re-)cognition. Exploring the propositions Ingold develops in his piece, my contribution looks at a number of visual-material phenomena in popular culture, craft, art, and nature, which are cherished for simple, enticing, and apparently universal beauty and tries to understand how such appreciation for things like latte art, spider webs, or kintsugi is constructed. Following from this, I trace the genealogy of Ingold’s alternative model for understanding beauty via a materially informed esthetics proposed by art historians of diverse geographical and theoretical backgrounds in the 1930s, to pragmatist philosophy, and finally back to Gottfried Semper’s practical esthetics. Semper’s model defined beauty as the expression and recognition of material affordances and the informed processes of art production ensuing from such affordances – theories that were also motivated by Semper’s pedagogical and industrial

interests. Finding beauty in acts of making, performed by human or other organisms, I conclude, is a potentially but not necessarily critical expression of the balancing act between caring and consuming.

Ecocritical Beauty?

Extraction of North Sea Oil and Gas in the Artistic Practice of Tanja Engelberts

Anna-Rosja Haveman

“Ecocritical beauty”: some might argue that this is an oxymoron because beauty and criticality are considered to be opposites. In the eco-critical art discourse, beauty is not often discussed in the first place and when it is, it is considered with suspicion. A beautiful image is easily commodified and can be co-opted for corporate interest. In relation to images of ecological disasters, we might ask, what does this image glorify? The art historian TJ Demos has argued for instance that the beautiful photographs of damaged landscapes by Edward Burtanski anaesthetize the perception of modern industrial pollution (Demos, 2017). The dilemma of representing the beauty of something that is considered malicious, is something the Dutch artist Tanja Engelberts navigates throughout her work about oil and gas rigs and platforms on the North Sea:

“I feel in awe of the technology that made the structures possible. At the same time, I feel embarrassed for these feelings, now that we know the consequence of 60 years of oil and gas production. In the past, the platforms were symbols of humans conquering nature. Now, we approach them more negatively, being aware of the natural harm they cause.”¹

In her films and photographs the artist captures the alluring architectures of the oil and gas extraction practices that are still in place, or being dismantled. In this paper I consider the artistic practice of Tanja Engelberts to question the role of beauty in relation to extraction in the Capitalocene (Moore, 2015). I explore the possibilities of beauty in eco-critical art, by questioning the limits of critique and the limits of beauty.

Film and the Beauty of Nature: An Ecological Perspective

Julian Hanich

In this talk I will raise the question if natural beauty in film, under certain circumstances, can contribute positively to the debate about ecocinema, ecocriticism and an environmentally progressive aesthetics.

Perceiving beauty is a key appeal of film, and the cinema, from its beginnings, often sought and found the sources of this pleasure in *nature*. This is no different today: natural beauty entices anywhere from mainstream movies to art cinema, from experimental films to wildlife documentaries, from YouTube videos to TikTok posts. Yet against the catastrophic upheavals reshaping our natural world for some viewers the experience of natural beauty has become increasingly fraught with doubt, even melancholy. While longing for cinema’s beauty of nature, they find it hard to avoid mourning it at the same time. Others have gone further and rejected looking at nature’s beauty as frivolous, even ideologically dubious. Starting from analyses of beautiful ecocritical films such as *At Sea* (2007, Peter Hutton), *RR* (2007, James Benning) or *Gunda* (2021, Victor Kossakovsky), I will show that rejecting representations of natural beauty would be a grave mistake: it would not only rob us of a fundamental aesthetic experience but also a weapon

¹ Tanja Engelberts, 2021 interviewed by the author.

against environmental ignorance.

Philosophically, my position comes close to what in environmental aesthetics is called *aesthetic preservationism*. According to scholars embracing this position, natural beauty is an important justification for environmental protection, and it comes with a powerful aesthetic imperative: Just as there's a duty to preserve beautiful art, there's an obligation to preserve beautiful nature. Aesthetic preservationism therefore concludes that environmental *ethics* should take environmental *aesthetics* more seriously. And for *this* the medium of film seems invaluable because it can combine moving images of beautiful nature with subtle ethical argumentations. The three films mentioned above will serve as strong cases in point.

Student Symposium

The Beauty of Lines Tracing the Journal Drawings of Henry David Thoreau

Eva Waterbolk

When one thinks of the American writer, naturalist, and Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), drawings might not be the first thing that come to mind. Between 1851 and 1860, however, drawing was an important part of Thoreau's writing practice during his daily walks around Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau made over 700 drawings in his journals, with subjects ranging from plants, meteorological phenomena to animal tracks. Although plenty has been written about Thoreau, his drawings have been largely neglected until now.

Whereas his written journal entries are often poetic and filled with revelations about the beauty and spirituality in both nature and the self, his drawings are highly schematic. They consist of small wobbly outlines representing the edges of things he perceived and could write so vividly about. On first glance, it seems that Thoreau was able to express his experiences beautifully in words, but was not artistically able to make 'beautiful' drawings of these experiences. However, I believe this is not the whole story.

Through a consideration of Thoreau's ideas about aesthetics and beauty in the context of nineteenth-century Romantic and Transcendental thought, I will argue that the crudeness of his drawings was done deliberately to a large extent. By zooming in on three drawings in relation to the written journal entries they accompany, I intend to show that the simplicity of their outlines on the one hand functioned as a mnemonic tool for Thoreau to perceive, memorize and relive sensory experiences, but on the other hand was meant to incite the imagination of readers and spark an aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Taking an ecocritical approach, I ultimately consider how Thoreau's practice of constructing lines, not only in the act of drawing but also in writing and walking, could potentially help humans today to open up to the experience of the beautiful in the other-than-human world. Given the current global ecological crisis, (re)engaging with our physical environment seems like a crucial step in activating change.

Touching Trouble An Eco-Phenomenology of Haptic Beauty in Film

Lucas Rinzema

This paper and talk examine the phenomenology and aesthetics of haptic beauty in film from an ecocritical perspective. They employ a historically and culturally located phenomenology to argue that haptic beauty can amount to an ecocinema aesthetics. First, haptic images are approached as evoking touch, proprioception and kinesthetics, and as ambivalently sticking to both the surface of the image and the depicted object. Haptic perception, moreover, emerges from the audiovisuality of film—both haptic visuality and haptic aurality are crucial. The focus on haptic perception, then, has implications for the study of beauty: the synesthetic character of haptic perception implies that—if there is to be haptic beauty—it has to be conceptualized as an experience of the whole body, not one restricted to the distal senses of sight and hearing. Furthermore, beauty is characterized as dependent—embedded in culturally and historically contingent contexts—decentering—consisting of a relation to the beautiful thing that allows it to take center stage, over oneself—and often tinged with a sense of ephemerality. Finally, the ecocritical argument made regarding haptic beauty relies on the abovementioned features of both haptics and beauty. Haptic beauty demands an embodied and embedded relation to the perceived:

as a consequence of the synesthetic embodiment of the senses, boundaries between self and world, and thereby human and nature are blurred. Through this blurring of boundaries, haptic beauty troubles anthropocentric gazes, breaching human/nature dualism by bringing perception into the body and into worldly entanglements. Haptic beauty thereby has the potential to engender ecocentric ways of perceiving.

Compositing Digital Nature The Operational Beauty of Virtual Film Environments

Sanna McGregor

Natural beauty is often broadly defined as there where human interference is least apparent—a pristine mountain range, or an untamed jungle—but what if such wild beauty is digitally produced? Building on existing scholarship foregrounding landscape and natural beauty, in this talk I focus on computer generated environments.

Imaginary digital landscapes may spring to mind, but we can consider also the subtler integrations of digital landscapes in composite filmmaking, where the replication of beautiful profilmic landscapes may be almost invisible or borderline uncanny. How does this digitisation of nature in film impact the affective experience of natural beauty? What are the implications for conceptions of natural beauty when it is not profilmic? In what ways is the digital landscape product and producer of anthropocenic thought? More productively, can an operational perception of natural beauty contribute to environmental cinema?

By examining films, such as *The Jungle Book* (Jon Favreau, 2016) and its twin *Mongli: Legend of the Jungle* (Andy Serkis, 2018), that use composite visual effects techniques and blur the boundaries between live-action and virtual footage, I aim to interrogate the affective experience of digital nature. I will argue that the beauty of such digitally generated environments distances viewers from nature and natural beauty, subverting conceptions of natural beauty onscreen. Simultaneously, digital landscapes shift viewers' admiration towards an operational aesthetic awareness that potentially produces a positive ecocritical perspective on nature. As an expression of human influence over, and continuous production of, nature, an operational aesthetic appreciation of digital environments potentially offers a conceptual framework for environmental activism.