



SEÇÃO: FILOSOFIA & INTERDISCIPLINARIDADE

## Unseen beauty: the persistence of the medieval in contemporary aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

*Beleza que não se vê: a persistência do medieval na estética contemporânea*

*Belleza que no se ve: la persistencia de lo medieval en la estética contemporánea*

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**Abstract:** The experience of beauty is no less mysterious for the aesthetician today than it was in the Middle Ages. Here I focus on the notion of 'unseen beauty' and how certain aspects of medieval philosophizing about the nature of beauty can still be of use for the contemporary aesthetician. I draw a comparison between some concepts that pervade the whole of the Medieval period – that there is a transcendent source of visible beauty, and that visible beauties function as images of the invisible beauty – with a modern conception of aesthetic experience, as it is expressed in authors like Clive Bell.

**Keywords:** visible beauty; unseen beauty; aesthetics; experience; art.

**Resumo:** A experiência da beleza não é menos misteriosa para a estética filosófica de hoje em dia do que era na idade média. Aqui, centro-me na noção de "beleza invisível" e como determinados aspectos do pensamento medieval acerca da natureza da beleza podem ser úteis ao esteta contemporâneo. Comparo alguns conceitos que permeiam todo o período medieval – de que há uma fonte transcendente da beleza visível e de que as belezas visíveis funcionam como imagens da beleza invisível – com uma concepção moderna da experiência estética, tal como expressa em autores como Clive Bell.

**Palavras-chave:** beleza visível; beleza invisível; estética; experiência; arte.

**Resumen:** La experiencia de la belleza no es menos misteriosa para la estética hoy que en la Edad Media. Aquí me concentro en la noción de "belleza invisible" y cómo ciertos aspectos del filosofar medieval sobre la naturaleza de la belleza aún pueden ser útiles para la estética contemporánea. Hago comparación entre algunos conceptos que impregnan todo el período medieval – que hay una fuente trascendente de la belleza visible y que las bellezas visibles funcionan como imágenes de la belleza invisible – con una concepción moderna de la experiencia estética, tal como se expresa en autores como Clive Bell.

**Palabras clave:** belleza visible; belleza invisible; estética; experiencia; arte.

### Introduction

In everyday conversation, we commonly speak of the beauty of thoughts, narrative plots, character traits, chess moves, theories, virtuous actions, and many other things sharing the common trait that their beauty cannot be 'seen' by perceptual means (the beauty of a chess move is not identical to the beauty of the gestures involved in moving pieces on a board, for even a mindless move could be done with graceful gestu-



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res on a fine crafted board), but rather must be apprehended by the mind. This is what I shall refer to by "unseen beauty". If we survey contemporary discussions in aesthetics, we'll find that there is not (with some honorable exceptions) a great amount of debate on the meaningfulness of such concept<sup>3</sup>. It would not be unfair to say that most aestheticians dismiss it as metaphorical talk for something not properly to do with aesthetics. In this, everyday speech seems to be more in line with medieval culture, while modern aesthetics is at variance with everyday speech even in our own time. This has implications to how aesthetics is seen in its relation with other domains of human experience, such as ethics and religion.

I must start with an important caveat. I am not a medievalist, but someone who works and thinks within the scope of contemporary aesthetics. This helps to explain some otherwise awkward features in my text, in the way I approach my subject. Not the least, the fact that despite the medieval references in it, my discussion focuses especially on how we can read modern ideas in the light of those references. I look at medieval ideas from the perspective of someone who, as a part of everyday routine, thinks of the 'puzzles' (as analytical philosophers like to refer to them) that make people with similar interests to mine gather and debate, trying to come up with enlightening or at least minimally helpful ideas to tackle those 'puzzles'. This means that my focus here is not on the history of thought by itself, but on how we are to understand today our experience of art and beauty. But sometimes only looking at how our current thought was slowly shaped by history are we able to see patterns that escape our everyday notice, in which we think 'intuitively' with categories we inherit and, more often than not, take as a given, at face value.

In other words, this will not be an exercise in the history of 'aesthetic thought' taking some specific period or authors in that tremendously long, diverse and complex world we refer

to as 'the Middle Ages'. The point is not to say that we should replace some modern theses for medieval ones, nor assess some medieval 'theses' for their truth or falsity, pulled out of any historical context, the way someone could insert old cogwheels into a new but faulty clockwork. That would be, I think, a pointless exercise. The purpose is rather to compare thought patterns to catch both continuities and discontinuities, and perhaps acquire some inspiration to reassess the framework in which we are posing and answering questions in our own time. This may involve a great deal of re-interpretation that goes way beyond anything that is literally present in the concerns of medieval thinkers. But then again, this is precisely how I think philosophy progresses and learns from its past.

What interests me in medieval thought about beauty is the relation between unseen beauty and visible beauty, that is, beauty we experience in visible things<sup>4</sup>. The latter is the kind of beauty that, for sheer philosophical prejudice, we believe we understand better than unseen beauty, perhaps because contemporary culture has become obsessed with visuality, 'looks' and 'glamour', though we really don't. It is but an effect of the 'given' we all inherited from modern aesthetics, but it is also more than that. Augustine once affirmed the primacy of the visual and aural faculties in the experience of beauty (AUGUSTINE, *De ordine*, II, 32-11): and he did so on quite plausible grounds. He noted the close connection between beauty and the apprehension of form and saw that objects of sight and hearing clearly manifest form, while objects of the other senses do not. Historically, this has played a certain role in our modern prejudice that visible beauty is somehow more intelligible than unseen beauty, but it is neither the whole of it, nor is it a good justification for it. To the medievals, unseen beauty was as familiar and unproblematic as the beauty of natural objects and human artifacts. And this was partly due to the high importance attributed to form – things

<sup>3</sup> A recent exception to this is Panos Paris (2018) who defends the idea of moral beauty by arguing that possession of form in the relevant sense is a minimum condition for beauty, and that virtues have form in the relevant sense. See also Levno von Plato (2017).

<sup>4</sup> By extension, this applies equally to audible things, "visible" standing here for "perceptual".

we do not experience perceptually also exhibit form, as much as things we do experience in that manner. It is an entrenched idea of our own time that 'formal', in matters of art, means 'perceptually given' on the surface of objects.

### 1 Beauty beyond beauty

For medieval thinkers in general, not only did the concept of unseen beauty make perfect sense, they even thought (following Plato) that unseen beauty is primary, while visible beauty is derivative; in the sense that it is unseen beauty that makes visible beauty beautiful. One of those thinkers even coined a term which we could translate as superbeauty (hyperkalon, superpulchrum), 'the beauty beyond beauty', to describe the highest of unseen beauties and paragon of all beauty, visible or invisible; and he came to exert a powerful influence over the whole medieval period, thanks to one of the most enduring acts of pious forgery ever perpetrated, and to his uncanny gift for hyperbole. I am obviously referring to the anonymous 6th century Syrian monk who eventually became known to us as the Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite (or Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite). And despite my enthusiasm for unseen beauty falling short of such conceptual exuberance, I do think there are in those texts of our medieval fellow partisans of unseen beauty conceptual pearls to be harvested by the contemporary philosopher.

One of those commentators, whose true identity we may never come to know, was a certain Petrus Hispanus, to whom is attributed authorship of the *Expositio in librorum beati Dionysii* – there are serious reasons to doubt it could have been the same Petrus Hispanus who was Pope John XXI, and some even hold there was no author involved here besides Thomas Gallus, abbot of Vercelli (McEvoy (1999)). The opinions of those who try to solve the mystery are divided, but, for my purposes, this is beside the matter. Whoever might have been the actual individual who produced those commentaries, they represent a persistent feature of medieval thought: the need to look back to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*,

in response to the overwhelming fascination it exerted on the medieval mind.

Even though we should not set our hopes high in searching these texts for philosophical innovations, we should note the occasional nuance that might be philosophically interesting, even if they actually escaped the direct awareness of the author. As an example, I call attention to Petrus Hispanus' words right at the beginning of the commentary on chapter 4 of the *Divine Names*, while explaining the sequence "good", "light", "beautiful", "love", "ecstasy" and "zeal" (*bono, lumine, pulchro, amore, extasi, zelo*), when, about the name "beautiful", he says that God «is called beautiful because it gives form by innocence» (*innocentia*) (Petrus Hispanus, *Expositio in Librorum De divinis nominibus Beati Dionysii*, IV, 1). Though probably this is connected with some commonly shared lexicological explanation of "pulcher" at the time, rather than with any original philosophical intention of its author, it is not any less interesting, since such explicit connection is not to be found in Dionysius.

In contrast with medieval texts addressing beauty, contemporary aesthetics is marked by (at least) two key aspects: 1) The development of the 'Modern System of the Arts' (KRISTELLER, 1951, 1952), which took place gradually and found one of its mature expressions in Charles Batteaux's 1746 book *Les Beaux Arts Reduits a une Meme Principe*. Today we read expressions such as 'the art of politics', 'the art of war' and 'the art of love' as quasi-metaphors for what 'ars' used to signify literally, namely, a skilled practice. We do this because we now have a deeply ingrained notion of a special domain of 'skilled practices' (poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, architecture), which we call 'Art', all of them supposedly bound by an 'essence', which the 18th century equated with the imitation of beauty in nature, but philosophers ever since have reshaped once and again, poked forward by 'counterexamples' to each successive theory, as the 'artworld' itself changed to include new conventions, new media, and so forth. But neither in Antiquity nor in the Middle Ages was there a special concept dividing the 'divers arts'

in those that are directed at the senses but also 'fine' (or 'polite') arts and those that are merely 'agreeable', 'decorative', mere 'crafts', and so on. What we started to call the 'fine' arts were packed together with an immense variety of 'mechanical' arts (a painter was a maker of images, not a maker of 'Art'); those that required manual labour of some sort, by contrast with the 'liberal' arts. We first had to invent the idea of 'Art' as separated from all other human 'skilful practices' (*technoi*), as well as a practice of enjoying the products of 'Art' as an end in itself, as something that supposedly transcends any religious or political function, and then a vocabulary to go with that practice. The language we still use nowadays to speak about the enjoyment of artworks was itself, to a great extent, invented in the course of the 18th century, namely, the language of 'aesthetics'. And it was in 1735 that Alexander Baumgarten coined the term aesthetics, a neologism from the ancient Greek word for 'perceiving' ( $\alpha\iota\sigma\theta\eta\tau\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ ). The word was since used differently by diverse authors, and eventually gained a foothold in both philosophical speech and everyday language, referring in general to our evaluative attitudes towards the appearances of things; and in this way "beauty" itself became one of the values that fall under the more encompassing notion of "the aesthetic"<sup>5</sup>. But while everyday language preserved references to the beauty of the unseen as a normal aesthetic use of the word "beauty", philosophical aesthetics kept moving towards a more thin or rarefied concept, a move that accompanied the development of the concept of Art, and the gradual identification of aesthetics with the 'philosophy of art'. 2) The Kantian introduction of the notion of "disinterested pleasure", which eventually led to a complete separation between judgments of taste and judgements of moral goodness: only "disinterested" judgements about the appearances of things count as judgements of taste, i.e., aesthetic judgements, in our

contemporary language. It is the idea of a pleasure not born of a previous desire nor entailing even the desire that the object based on that pleasure exists. This means that the connection with desires and interests, particularly, moral, political, and religious interests, to the extent that they constitute aspects of a certain experience, will determine that such aspects are not *bona fide* aesthetic ones. The religious function of a picture, for instance, will be extraneous to its aesthetic character; enjoying the beauty of human bodies is under doubt as a genuine aesthetic pleasure, because of the connection with sexual desires. Any interest or desire that is not exhausted in the object's appearance itself, regardless of any connections to the wider world, will count towards the non-aesthetic character of the experience in which it figures. The actual details of this story are rather complicated, but the slow distillation of the modern concept of the aesthetic can be seen to culminate in the emergence of formalism as a doctrine of art appreciation: ultimately, only "formal" properties of artworks are the object of genuine aesthetic appreciation. And if we read any recent paper in aesthetics dealing with the issue of formalism in art, we will find a shared conception of what counts as "formal property" in this context – namely, properties of artistic objects that are grasped perceptually, 'surface appearance properties'; and this will be opposed to "content", that is, any symbolic or representational links with the wider world, bringing to mind interests or desires that turn the experience of form into something of 'instrumental' rather than 'intrinsic' value. Aesthetics becomes a matter of lines, colours, shapes, textures, and their arrangement in a perceptual whole, a physical "vehicle" of "aesthetic experiences" – in other words, it becomes a matter of the perception of form, under a certain (modern) understanding of what counts as "form". The task of the aesthetician will then be to explain such properties in a way

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<sup>5</sup> Other such values correspond to what some have called "thick" aesthetic predicates: the graceful, the elegant, the dainty, the dumpy, the fustian, the delicate, etc. The 20th century aesthetician Frank Sibley (1959) has made clear how virtually any predicate can function as an aesthetic predicate, when applied figuratively or metaphorically: "solid", "silky", "effervescent", "powerful", "dynamic", etc. One interesting aspect is that some such terms seem to require a moral component for us to even understand their application in aesthetic contexts, as is the case with sincerity, sentimentality or even kitsch.

that makes them “epistemically respectable”, or simply to explain them away.

The fact that we inherited from the 18th century this slowly distilled product that is the concept of the aesthetic, a process which was also one of separation of the aesthetic from several domains of life – I will speak below of the secularization of the experience of beauty in art, at the same time that Art is elevated to a kind of lay religion –, is not without its difficulties. Several examples concern how certain moral notions seem to be involved in the very understanding of part of our aesthetic vocabulary, or how non-perceptual information that is either inferred or assumed in the experience of an object or event seem to have consequences for the appreciation of that object in a way we feel compelled to describe as ‘aesthetic’. Now, the usefulness of medieval ideas about beauty as a conceptual “fertilizer” of contemporary aesthetics lies precisely in the fact that such ideas developed before the two key aspects I mentioned (in the advent of modern aesthetics) became a sort of “default” or “conventional wisdom” tacitly marking the boundaries of the aesthetic as a dimension of human life. To uncover such ideas and to see how they can become meaningful today and not merely a museum of past curiosities is part of what motivates me to revisit the uncanny fields of Dionysian discourse on the “beautiful and the good” and its reverberations in the commentary practice, as it is exemplified in texts such as Petrus Hispanus’ *Expositiones*.

## 2 Aesthetics, art and religion

But before we get into any such specifically medieval ideas, I want to quote the non-medieval author of a book which, despite its rootedness in contemporary analytic philosophy, evokes in many aspects an understanding of beauty that has something distinctively pre-modern about it, in the sense that beauty is seen there

not as something subjective but part of the real world and playing a role in cognitive processes.<sup>6</sup> However, the following quote does not concern such aspects but rather the relationship between beauty, art and religion; specifically, how the constitution of a modern aesthetic discourse involved suppression of the metaphysical and theological emphasis once given to beauty, as Art “with an A” gradually becomes the exclusive focus of interest while, at the same time, it absorbs features of religious institutions, but in a context of laicization of the said speech, to make it independent (even if still compatible with) a theological view<sup>7</sup>:

The notion of the aesthetic disinterested interest is perhaps one aspect of the great romanticist attempt to secularize European culture, with art as a substitute for religion. Romanticism has tried to model art on religious institutions, and to a great extent it has succeeded: we dress for the opera as we would for church, assume an attitude of reverence toward art and artists as was traditionally accorded God and his ministers, treat art as lofty and spiritual, etc. Now religion teaches that it is wrong to worship God in order to serve one’s own interests. God should be worshiped because he deserves to be worshiped; it is sacrilegious to treat worship as a profitable transaction. We are supposed to love God for what he is, and love is unselfish. Aspiring to replace religion, romanticism needed a new selfless interest that transcends mundane interests. Thence the disinterested interest (ZEMACH, 1997, p. 34).

A telling example of how this mindset about art has become well established in human culture was given by Wolterstorff in a lecture about his book *Art Rethought* (2015), delivered in Wheaton College.<sup>8</sup> He recalls a moment when he was sitting in the lobby of the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington D.C. There he noticed how mothers coming inside the museum with their children ordered them to be quiet, not to talk, as they went through the turnstile at the entrance. He further comments that “people probably talk more in church nowadays than they do in art

<sup>6</sup> In fact, as a curiosity, the book even contains a very brief paraphrase of Aquinas and, elsewhere, the same author produces remarks about beauty that are reminiscent. The role that desire plays in this aesthetic theory is also reminiscent of the medieval connection between eros and pulchritudo.

<sup>7</sup> One possible analogy, even if a strained one, would be with the way Marxism acquired the features of a state religion, absorbing functions that once belonged to religious institutions, while the doctrine itself was meant as an overcoming of religion.

<sup>8</sup> Available in Wheaton College’s Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUPEJGKBE-w> (last accessed 20/02/2022). Wolterstorff narrates the episode at 34:10 min of the video.

museums". But those who are still not convinced by such examples which any of us have surely at one time or another experienced, can simply mind the language used by the great early 20th century priest of formalism about art, Clive Bell:

He who would feel the significance of art must make himself humble before it. [...] Whatever the world of aesthetic contemplation may be, it is not the world of human business and passion; in it the chatter and tumult of material existence is unheard, or heard only as echo of some more ultimate harmony (BELL, 1913, p. 70-71).

Wolterstorff is a fierce critic of what he calls 'The Grand Narrative of Art' in the modern world, a narrative which, according to him, still holds many contemporary philosophers of art under its spell. The 'Grand Narrative' consists in a specific way of telling a 'standard story' of certain historical and sociological changes that occurred in the early modern world and shaped our understanding of the arts for the following centuries. Namely, this 'grand' way of telling that story is based on two 'grand narrative theses': the 'art-historical thesis' and the 'sociological thesis'. The former is the idea that 'when works of the arts are attended to for the sake of the attending itself' (27) this is not just one more episode in the endless sequence of changes that the arts undergo; rather, this is the arts 'coming into their own', the idea of 'Art' reaching a state of 'historical maturity', when previously they were subordinate to an extraneous teleology. In its turn, the sociological thesis is the idea that the arts are teleologically exceptional, so to speak, they are 'socially other and transcendent', in Wolterstorff's phrase. They are the exception to the ever-conquering rule of instrumental rationality which the modern world expands into every corner of daily existence. In a word, the arts are autotelic. Such art is for 'contemplation' or 'absorbed aesthetic attention' for the sake of the attending itself, as an intrinsically valuable experience. Romanticism in the 19th century and, ultimately, Aestheticism, the movement of *l'art pour l'art*, are the consummation of the 'sociological thesis' described by Wolterstorff.

According to the author, several negative consequences follow from the 'Grand Narrative'. It

misrepresents the reality of the arts in our own time: it made us prone to disregard entire practices of art making and appreciating that do not fit the model of 'absorbed aesthetic attention for its own sake'. Examples are liturgical art, memorial art, social protest art, work songs, among others. This is a case of 'conceptual illusion': we mistake an ideology of art for a philosophical explanation of the place of art in human life, and the end result is mystification rather than clarification. Although I can't go into a detailed analysis of Wolterstorff's argument, but it is important to take notice of it in connection with Zemach's remark. When we today address the question of whether there was a medieval aesthetics properly speaking, we should take care not to confuse the limits of that ideology of art (the 'Grand Narrative') with the limits of aesthetics as a domain of human thought and activity. To think of medieval aesthetics is to think of the place of aesthetics in a world without the Grand Narrative or 'Art'. And that means that to think of medieval aesthetics is also to rethink our conceptions of art, beauty, aesthetic value and the relations that hold between these things.

In fact, what usually motivates skepticism about the existence of medieval aesthetics (MAREN-BON, 2011, p. 26-33; SPEER, 2012, p. 661-684), properly speaking, is the absence, in medieval discourse, of such features that came to be taken as definitive of "mature" aesthetics. These are the features that determined the outlines of modern aesthetics when it emerged as a philosophical discipline, which took place more or less concomitantly, as I said already, with the consolidation of what has come to be known as the system of the 'fine arts'. The vocabulary of 'aesthetics' was, in a way, created for the emergence of this 'new thing' which was 'the arts coming into their own', the production of objects to be contemplated (aesthetically attended) for the sake of the attending itself. Hence, if a form of discourse does not begin and end with Art, it will not seem like 'aesthetics' in the proper sense.

From the vantage point of someone brought up with the categories of modern aesthetics, many things in the medieval discourse on be-

auty may indeed seem strange: we have been 'taught' that aesthetic experience is a separate, self-enclosed kind of experience, which is strictly bound to the perceptual and restricted to the domain of artworks. This implies that things like morality, politics and religion are extraneous to the aesthetic (a religious picture may be good qua artwork, but this will be independent from its religious function). Because medieval discussions of beauty are invariably tied to a metaphysical or theological frame, doubts have been raised as to whether these discussions properly belong to aesthetics, and, ultimately, whether it makes sense to speak of medieval aesthetics at all. In other words, modern aesthetics largely coincides with the secularization of the discourse on beauty, together with the emerging role of the Artist as a sort of secular priest.

On the other hand, there is undoubtedly something uneasy about asking whether there really is a medieval aesthetics, since, quite obviously, the medievals, no less than us, had the experience of beauty and ugliness, and they did philosophize about it: they did try to explain what beauty is and what is its place in the wider scheme of things. However, when contemporary philosophers speak of "aesthetic experiences" and "aesthetic values", they are using concepts that have no parallel in medieval culture. The concept of "the aesthetic", which encompasses beauty but also other "aesthetic values", positive as well as negative; the idea of an aesthetic value clearly distinct from other values, such as the moral ones; the idea of a separate kind of experience, "aesthetic experience", distinguished from other kinds of experience by characteristics such as disinterested pleasure, primarily directed at the perceptual features of a special sort of object, artworks; as well as the lofty place ascribed to art and artists, the idea of an autonomy of art - an activity which

is autotelic, whose justification lies in itself, not to be measured by or answerable to any 'worldly' standards -, are all modern inventions with no clear counterparts in the medieval world. But what the quoted passage from Zemach suggests is that modern aesthetics did not actually cut ties with religion (or with a religious mindframe), but rather shifted the focus of worship, as well as the language. With that shift of language, 'Platonic reveries' such as 'unseen beauty', beauty not perceived by the senses, but grasped by the mind, eventually came to be dismissed as mere metaphors<sup>9</sup>.

We should consider what is involved in the strongest intuitions against the idea that there was such a thing as 'medieval aesthetics', namely: the lack of a discourse that is focused primarily on 'Art' and especially on a sui generis kind of experience, 'aesthetic experience' brought about by that specific category of objects. Why? Because they are out of gear even with the present, although they do convey a sort of orthodox view that was once prevalent in academic writing but is now sided with theoretical approaches that question the very basics of that orthodox view. If we think of pragmatist developments in aesthetics since the publication of Dewey's *Art as Experience* in 1934, which has been revisited by authors like Richard Shusterman (2000), and the development of what is now known as *Everyday Aesthetics* (SAITO, 2007; IRVIN, 2008), and even more recently with Dominic Lopes' (2018) 'network theory',<sup>10</sup> a number of aestheticians begin to see the social institution of Art, and the social practices that go along with it, as merely a specific part or branch in the whole of our 'aesthetic life'. *Mutatis mutandis* (evidently) this is closer to a medieval mindset, in the sense that it pulls in the opposite direction from the aesthetics of 18th century and then Romanticism: if contemporary aesthetics shows signs of doing

<sup>9</sup> To be sure, things are actually not so linear, for some 18<sup>th</sup> century aestheticians accepted that judgements of virtue are judgements of taste - so called "moderate moralism" in contemporary aesthetics is based on Hume -, and even later figures in the romantic period were still involved in the tradition of the "beautiful soul". I am, in a way, oversimplifying things, as if there was a direct line between the formation of the concept of the aesthetic and a full-fledged aesthetic formalism, with its thesis of the dependence of aesthetic properties on sensory properties. In reality, the transitions leading from one thing to another are messier and more mixed.

<sup>10</sup> Very succinctly, the theory states that any one of us, and not just artists or 'art lovers', is already a participant in one or more out of a myriad 'aesthetic practices' within particular 'domains', to the extent that many reasons for acting within many practices will be of an aesthetic character. In this 'network' system of practices, there is no special place afforded to 'Art', which is but one, very specific domain. In this sense, the resurgence of pragmatism in aesthetics represents a waning of the 'Grand Narrative'.

away with the 'Grand Narrative', then the idea of an 'aesthetics' before that narrative was in place loses some of its 'counter-intuitiveness', as the narrative itself loses its intellectual allure.

But why is this important? Because it also suggests that the limits of aesthetics do not have to be the limits set by our modern conceptions. Maybe these conceptions prevent us from having a more powerful and complete notion of what aesthetic value is. And maybe there is room for medieval ideas to help us develop such a notion.

### 3 Religious experience and aesthetic experience

When listing the characteristics that pull apart modern aesthetics from medieval discourse on beauty, I mentioned the idea of a separate kind of experience, aesthetic experience, whose privileged object are artworks, when approached in the appropriate manner, e.g., when one focuses on those properties of an artistic object that are bona fide aesthetic properties, or when those objects are experienced with the appropriate kind of attention, namely, 'aesthetic attention'. One example of this conceptual frame is found in Clive Bell's formalist theory of art: there are these special mental states we may undergo when experiencing works of art, called aesthetic emotions; what makes an emotion aesthetic is its being aroused by a specific feature supposedly characteristic of good works of art, namely, significant form. This theory has been famously charged with circularity, since it seems we have no other way of identifying significant form other than by saying it is the set of an artwork's properties that arouse the aesthetic emotion. So, aesthetic emotion is defined in terms of significant form, and significant form is defined in terms of aesthetic emotion, and there seems to be no way out of the circle. This is the famous objection responsible for the univocal consensus that Bell's theory belongs in philosophy's cabinet of historical curiosities. But, on the one hand, the objection itself does not show that there are no such things as aesthetic emotion or significant form; and, on the other hand, the objection is based on a tradition of ignoring everything else

Bell says in his book from the first chapter ('The aesthetic hypothesis') onwards. Why? I would say, for reasons quite similar to those that may foster scepticism about the true 'aesthetic' significance of medieval texts about beauty. The kind of answers Bell allows himself to freely explore are not fashionable, and this is to a great extent due to a certain inherent religiousness or even mysticism in everything he says beyond positing significant form and aesthetic emotion to explain art. The rest of his book is simply and literally dismissed; and without it, excised from its context, the 'aesthetic hypothesis' seems just like an earlier, less sophisticated variant of contemporary formalism.

Bell's conception of an aesthetic experience (the undergoing of a special kind of emotional state), as paradigmatically beginning and ending in Art and having no place in the world outside Art, seems to provide the sharpest contrast with the experience involved in the medieval discourse on beauty, as it is exemplified in the tradition of looking back to Dionysian texts, where the relevant experience is religious experience, in the sense that it begins and ends with the divine (or, at least, those human mental states that take the divine as their "intentional object"), an experience that is geared towards union with God. Now, one elegant expression of what this "experience" is supposed to be is found, as I see it, in the following passage by Umberto Eco, which also quotes Dionysius:

The whole of Chapter IV of Dionysius' *The Divine Names* (especially IV, 7 and 10) presents the universe as a cascade of beauties springing forth from the First Principle, a dazzling radiance of sensuous splendors which diversify in all created being: «That, beautiful beyond being, is said to be Beauty – for it gives beauty from itself in a manner appropriate to each, it causes the consonance and splendor of all. it flashes forth upon all, after the manner of light, the beauty producing gifts of its flowing ray, it calls all to itself, when it is called beauty» (ECO, 1988, p. 23-24).

To be put in a position to vividly experience the world as described in this manner, that is, to experience the world as theophany, as itself a manifestation of the divine – this is the experience placed at the centre of Dionysian discourse on



beauty, which is a kind of religious experience. What concerns me now is the contrast between the two kinds of experience: aesthetic experience, as it figures in Bell's theory (as representative of the modern approach to the aesthetic) and religious experience, as it figures centrally in the medieval discourse on beauty (here contrasted with modern aesthetics).

In his paper "Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension", Nicholas Wolterstorff points out how Bell's language in describing the value of art, the experience of art proper, and what makes significant form significant resembles, or better yet, how it is religious language:

The language Bell here uses to develop his "aesthetic hypothesis" carries unmistakable echoes of religious language; indeed, it is religious language. "A gift beyond all price." "The world's salvation". "Lifted above the stream of life." "Out of life into ecstasy." A world "whose significance is unrelated to the significance of life" (WOLTERSTORFF, 2004, p. 326).

Wolterstorff delves into the least examined part of Bell's work, Art, namely the chapter titled 'Art and Religion', to reveal deep similarities between Bell's view of the practices of the artist and those of the mystic: both are practices that seek a state of exaltation, ecstasy or the state of being "lifted" from ordinary life. In the case of art, such exalted states are achieved through the contemplation of significant form, and one major difference, as I see it, is the importance of the "vehicle", i.e., the objects that are the result of human expression by manipulations in a medium. Every object has a form, but not all have significant form, and what makes form significant? In Bell's theory, it is the artist's expression of his own aesthetic emotion, which he undergoes when considering objects as "pure forms", stripped of their associations with ordinary life, an emotion which is then retrieved by the observer upon attending to the artwork. But why do certain forms give rise to this emotion? Here again we meet with Bell's surprising answer: significant form is «form behind which we catch a sense of ultimate reality» (BELL, 1913, p. 54), «of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm» (BELL,

1913, p. 69). He continues:

Call it by what name you will, the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things - that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality. And if a more or less unconscious apprehension of this latent reality of material things be, indeed, the cause of that strange emotion, a passion to express which is the inspiration of many artists, it seems reasonable to suppose that those who, unaided by material objects, experience the same emotion have come by another road to the same country. (BELL, 1913, p. 69-70, my italics).

This is what Bell calls his 'metaphysical hypothesis', which he presents as an answer to the question "Why do certain arrangements and combinations of form move us so strangely?" (BELL, 1913, p. 49) In more precise terms, the answer will be formulated thus:

'Because artists can express in combinations of lines and colours an emotion felt for reality which reveals itself through line and colour.' If this suggestion were accepted it would follow that 'significant form' was form behind which we catch a sense of ultimate reality (BELL, 1913, p. 54, my italic).

It is a part of his book that is virtually never considered in discussions of his views, although anthologies in aesthetics have for decades reproduced parts of his first chapter, on the 'aesthetic hypothesis', namely, that the essence of art is 'significant form' and the way we know we are in the presence of significant form is by experiencing the 'aesthetic emotion'. One of the rare cases of consensus in philosophical theorizing is the famous objection of circularity wielded against this 'aesthetic hypothesis', which I already mentioned above. Of course, his explanation of the hypothesis in terms of this further 'metaphysical hypothesis' is not considered, since the metaphysics that goes with it is no more fashionable these days than the metaphysics of Dionysius. Nonetheless, it is astonishing to contrast these ideas with present day formalism and its narrow focus on the perceptual as the sole terrain of aesthetic experience. After all, Bell explicitly cites the mystic and the mathematician as cases of those who experience the 'ecstasy' of significant form

without the aid of 'material objects' (unlike artists and 'lovers of art') (BELL, 1913, p. 70). Present day formalists are definitely not prone to count the experiences of mystics or the contemplation of mathematical beauty<sup>11</sup> as genuine cases of aesthetic experience. Contemporary formalism holds steadfast to what is known in the field's jargon as 'aesthetic-sensory dependence' or 'supervenience of the aesthetic on the sensory'. This means that if A is an aesthetic property, then it will depend on a potentially infinite disjunction of non-aesthetic properties that must include sensory properties, even if some of the properties included in each 'cluster' are non-sensory (e.g. contextual or history-of-production properties), that is, if one is a moderate aesthetic formalist. Something that has no sensory properties (e.g., chess moves, a mathematical proof, etc.) cannot be a bona fide bearer of genuine aesthetic properties. This makes Bell *sui generis* among modern aestheticians. Although he does not equate 'significant form' with beauty (in the strict sense), there is in the idea of something 'that lies behind the appearance of all things' constituting the aesthetic value of what we perceive a connection to Dionysius' hyperkalum or superpulchrum I mentioned in section 2 above. The beauty which we see is an echo of 'the all-pervading rhythm which informs all things':

"... many people, though they feel the tremendous significance of form, feel also a cautious dislike for big words; and 'reality' is a very big one. These prefer to say that what the artist surprises behind form, or seizes by sheer force of imagination, is the all-pervading rhythm that informs all things; and I have said that I will never quarrel with that blessed word 'rhythm.'" (BELL, 1913, p. 57, *my italic*).

The choice of the word 'rhythm' to describe the sort of experience Bell is struggling to articulate in his mystical jargon cannot but take us back to the pages of St. Augustine's *De Musica*, where 'numbers' (*arithmoi*) and their 'harmony' (*numerositas*) make up the fabric through which the divine light shines on the human intellect. The astonishment we feel at words as those quoted

above, coming from a formalist such as Bell is no lesser than the astonishment felt by readers of Eduard Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful*, upon laying their eyes on the final paragraph of the work, before its removal by the author, from the third edition onwards:

It is not merely and absolutely through its own intrinsic beauty that music affects the listener, but rather at the same time as a sounding image of the great motions of the universe. Through profound and secret connections to nature, the meaning of tones elevates itself high above the tones themselves, allowing us to feel at the same time the infinite in works of human talent. Just as the elements of music—sound, tone, rhythm, loudness, softness—are found throughout the entire universe, so does one find anew in music the entire universe. (HANSLICK, 1854 apud BONDS, 2014, p. 8)

I will not go into a detailed analysis of Hanslick's thought here, but this reveals at least a curious tendency in defenders of formalism to hint or gesture, at the limits of their conceptual resources, in the direction of something akin to the religious or mystic exaltation. In fact, even a staunch defender of contemporary aesthetic formalism, like Nick Zangwill, acknowledges there is something common between aesthetic experience and mysticism – Zangwill calls it "this-worldly mysticism" (ZANGWILL, 2015, p. 115-116), although in this case the common feature shared is the "ineffability" of aesthetic experiences: our inability to provide literal descriptions of the content of aesthetic experiences. But I will not go into that subject here. What is important to note is that there are links between modern aesthetic theories and religion that run deeper than those pointed out by Zemach at the sociological level of artistic institutions absorbing features that are characteristic of religious institutions. As it happens, Wolterstorff contrasts different conceptual frameworks within modern aesthetic theory: those that attempt to provide aesthetics with an entirely "secular" basis – as is the case with the Kantian explanation of the experience of beauty purely in terms of the "free play" of cognitive faculties (which can stand here for any kind of "reductive"

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance Zangwill (2009).

explanation) and those such as Bell's, which are non-reductive, but end up gesturing towards a transcendent source of aesthetic value, in a way that is surprisingly reminiscent of the medieval discourse on beauty, despite the unmistakably modern elements of the central importance of Art as the exclusive 'vehicle' of significant form and, thus, of aesthetic experience, and also the central place of the artist and artistic practices as individual expression of a special emotion (aesthetic emotion). Another important difference would be the insistence that "significant form" be always exhibited by perceptual objects – artworks or physical "instantiations" of artworks (in the case of music, etc.). But given the way significant form is characterized by Bell, it is hard to see why non-perceptual aspects of reality (such as the items listed at the beginning of this paper) should not have it also. Neither is the contemporary debate on whether aesthetic properties must "supervene" on sensory properties closed, so we could exclude aesthetic judgements on those items. Also, in order to retain Bell's notion of "significant form" as a useful concept, we need not retain all aspects of his theory. Maybe significant form can become more enlightening if recast into a different conceptual framework.

Having said all this, what are we to say of the connection between religious experience and aesthetic experience? Are they mutually exclusive kinds of experience, or is religious experience just one example of human experience that has, among others, aesthetic aspects? It seems that modern aesthetics created the idea of aesthetic experience through a narrowing of focus from the kind of religious experience we find in earlier accounts of beauty, that is, by abstraction of certain features of this latter kind of experience, while preserving others, in a more rarefied form. If this is so, could it not be that the religious experience of the beautiful is itself but a narrow focus version of an even wider phenomenon?

#### 4 Two medieval ideas for contemporary aesthetics

This paper is based on the notion that we can

'fertilize' contemporary aesthetics by returning to (re-reading and re-interpreting) medieval ideas on beauty and our experience of it. The last section emphasized the continuities already present in modern aesthetic theories such as Bell's: if a sense of "ultimate reality" as it "reveals" itself in the form of certain objects is to be the source of visible beauty, we are not that far away from the Dionysian scheme, echoed throughout the medieval period in the form of a commentary tradition, of visible beauty being subordinate to unseen beauty – since "ultimate reality" is hardly an object of perceptual experience, nor is a "sense" of it a case of perceptual experience.

I will conclude by emphasizing two ideas, derived from the medieval Dionysian tradition, that seem to me interesting, if suitably reinterpreted, for contemporary aesthetics. These are the following: the idea that there is some fundamental connection between the beautiful and the good; and the idea, expressed in Dionysian texts and reiterated by the commentary tradition, of visible beauty being a sort of image of unseen beauty.

##### 4.1 *Pulchrum et bonum*

To fully grasp the "narrowing of focus" I spoke about above, when comparing religious experience and aesthetic experience as conceptualized by modern aesthetics, one must realize that the very designation of our discipline by the name "aesthetics" may be the result of a philosophical misconception. "Aesthetic experience" is a modern invention born out of the idea that we can fully separate two aspects of our "evaluative lives", that is, our lives as beings who cannot avoid valuing things, from simple objects and events, to actions, and, ultimately to the way a human life is lived: the beautiful and the good. While the idea of an intimate connection between these two aspects was eventually set aside by modern aesthetics (despite exceptions, such as Shaftesbury (2000) or Reid (1786)), it was known to the ancients as *kalokagathia*, and we find it expressed in Petrus Hispanus' commentary by the use of John Sarrazin's translation of the Greek to *kalon* by "the beautiful and the good" (*pulchrum*

et bonum), as if they form a single item:

And generally every existent, whether bodily or spiritual, is beautiful from the beautiful and good from the good. Or better yet, it is good from the beautiful and it is beautiful from the good. And it is found in the beautiful and the good in participating in the resonance of the beautiful in the appearance and of the good in existence (Petrus Hispanus, *Expositio in librorum de divinis nominibus beati Dionysii*, IV, 26).

One wonders what single term could stand for this twofold unity. For better and worse, we are stuck with the word coined by Baumgarten, but what matters is whether we have the most "enlightened" concept of "the aesthetic" we can devise, not the word we use to express that concept. Before Kant's peculiar twist on "disinterested interest", the notion of "taste" encompassed both judgements of beauty and virtue in a way that accommodated the concept of moral beauty. To overcome the "gap" between the moral and the aesthetic means to overcome Bell's notion that the "world" of aesthetic contemplation is «unrelated to the significance of life» (BELL, 1913, p. 26-27), shedding light, for instance, on the way many terms of aesthetic appraisal have an inescapable moral component (and vice-versa).<sup>12</sup> In fact, our account of Bell's "aesthetic experience" suggests that subtracting "the good" from "the beautiful and the good", and adding our historically contingent, 18th century inspired and romantically inflected concept of Art, are the basic operations by which we move from the religious experiences of Dionysian texts to the modern notion of an "aesthetic experience". All this is not to say that we cannot conceptually separate beauty and goodness, at least in the sense that physical attractiveness and moral character can be at variance, as in the well-known story of Dorian Gray, devised by Oscar Wilde. The point is rather that our ability to experience things as possessing aesthetic qualities is deeply connected to our nature as beings who value morally, so that the beautiful and the good are strongly intertwined. The idea of a single value which fuses both aspects, as it is condensed in *pulchrum et bonum*, is one

of the most interesting aspects of the medieval conception of beauty.

#### 4.2 Visible beauty as "image" of unseen beauty

In discussing the idea, inherited from classical antiquity, that beauty consists in certain relations of symmetry or proportion between parts of a complex whole, Plotinus (sixth treatise of the first *Ennead*) called attention to the fact that such relations are insufficient to explain beauty: there are countless things whose beauty we appreciate and yet they are "simple". The examples he provides have something to do either with light or with things one cannot perceive through the senses but are rather apprehended in thought alone. And about the specific case of color, Plotinus says something that is as fascinating as it is puzzling: «The simple beauty of a color is derived from a form that dominates the obscurity of matter and from the presence of an incorporeal light that is reason and idea» (Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6 (ECO, 2004, p. 103)).

Another idea we find in the texts of the Pseudo-Dionysius, but also throughout the long tradition of thinkers who look back to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, is the idea of visible beauty being "an image of" unseen beauty (ECO, 1988, p. 139; ECO, 2002, p. 58). So, in the first chapter of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, we find the following claim: «For the thinking man, phenomenal beauties become images of invisible beauty» (Pseudo-Dionysius, *De coelestia hierarchia*, PG 3, c. 121 (TATARKIEWICZ, 1970, p. 34)). There are slight variations by Petrus Hispanus in the commentary to this passage, playing with the role of light in Neoplatonic thought: not only «sensible beauties are the images of invisible beauty», but also «visible lights are the images of intelligible light» (Petrus Hispanus, *Expositio in librorum De angelica hierarchia beati Dionysii*, I, 13).

The experience of beauty is more than merely being fed through the senses with pleasant visual and aural stimuli. The taste of sugar is pleasant, but no one says sugar is beautiful on account

<sup>12</sup> Examples: when we speak of works as being sincere, sentimental, fustian or *hitsch*.

of it, although the "sweetness" of a smile is an aesthetic quality of it, and the term "sugary" can be used to point out a specific form of aesthetic badness. We call beautiful those things that bear some sort of significance, or that "resonate" with aspects of our nature and of our lives that cannot possibly be the object of visual or aural experience. Our common experience of beauty, in life as well as in art, i.e., experience of visible beauty, is dependent on a symbolic connection our minds establish between the seen and the unseen. In other words, it reestablishes the Platonic priority of unseen beauty over visible beauty, but without returning to a Platonic metaphysics. This is a hypothesis I find most interesting to pursue in contemporary aesthetics.

## Conclusion

Be they artists or lovers of art, mystics of mathematicians, those who achieve ecstasy are those who have freed themselves from the arrogance of humanity. He who would feel the significance of art must make himself humble before it (BELL, 1913, p. 70).

We have compared the religious experience of the world as it stems from the medieval discourse on beauty with a modern conception of aesthetic experience. The major difference between them concerns the place which unseen beauty is given within the conceptual scheme. The modern concept of the aesthetic is achieved by subtraction of the theological elements present in the medieval discourse, and ultimately by the Kantian introduction of disinterested pleasure, which cuts aesthetic significance from the sphere of our desires: pleasure in beauty is conceived as distinct from the kind of pleasure felt, for instance, in the moral traits of persons. It becomes an interest in "pure forms", unconnected from the significance of life. Nonetheless, when a formalist such as Bell tries to explain why our experience of the world contains such a thing as aesthetically significant forms, he seems unable to avoid the vocabulary of transcendence. As if transcendence was the way out of his argumentative circle, between aesthetic emotion and significant form.

My conclusion is not that we should return to the vocabulary of transcendence, or that we should replace aesthetic experience with religious experience. In fact, I have suggested that what we have been calling 'aesthetic experience' turns out, in many cases, to be a disguised form of religious experience. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but failing to grasp that fact is an impediment to a better understanding of our 'aesthetic life'. Perhaps a better conception of the aesthetic will show religious experience to be one kind of aesthetic experience among many. Personally, I think all human experience has an aesthetic dimension, much in the same way that Kant thought any experience would be the result of sense data *organized* by categories of the understanding: we can't help it. The point was rather to highlight this difference in conceptual structure, between medieval and modern aesthetics: the idea that visible beauty is beauty in virtue of its connection with unseen beauty, by contrast with a conception in which visible beauty is the only beauty there is.

The medieval language of light, proportion, and the symbolic saturation of the visible by the unseen might help us to put modern concepts in a new perspective: how does form become significant? Through the clarity and splendour of the idea that shines forth in the obscurity of matter. In a less poetic language, by the fact that our experiences of beauty are informed by ideals that connect the form of objects, in a wide sense, with the good and also with a sense of ultimate reality, which lends itself to be described in theological terms, though it need not be understood metaphysically in that way.

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