Live 8 Crowds:

The Ghostly Return of the Beautiful People?

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What has first to have itself proved is of little value.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols.*

Both philosophically and psychologically, beauty and terror seem always to have been intimately linked. Analyzing the beautiful as part of the sublime, Kant (1790) pointed to Nature's sublime as a source of fear, based on a recognition of the impotence of our resistance to it. Certainly, both beauty and terror go beyond the ability of language to encompass or exhaust their qualities in words.

Beauty is as subversive as any dream in thwarting attempts to maintain control over its reality through categorization and language. The beautiful can never be thoroughly explained, and that is one of its characteristics. As much as terror, it confronts us with an Event (in Alain Badiou's terminology), an experience that changes the future, the past and the present. We certainly cannot be rationally argued into an appreciation of beauty or terror (except through an exercise of our imaginations)—and both share the major advantage, to their creator or manipulator, of not requiring proof to exert their power. Kant himself speaks of beauty as appealing to the imagination rather than the understanding, but I see little reason not to extend this definition to terror as well.

The Screen for the Uncanny

Freud explicated the paradox at a psychological level in "Screen Memories" (1899). The main argument of his essay is, of course, that the most powerful scenes that seem to come from our history may not be memories at all, but, drawing on a sexually charged period from his own

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student years, Freud's sub-text is that we should distrust our strongest impressions of beauty because of the cruelty in a repressed incident that it may mask. Returning to the topic twenty years later in "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), Freud noted with astonishment that treatises on aesthetics "in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime" rather than the *unheimlich*, leaving him to tackle "all that is terrible—[...] all that arouses dread and creeping horror." The curious aspect of this essay, which seems not much remarked, is that he clearly considers the uncanny as aesthetic rather than simply psychological in its essence.

In an exteriorization of Freudian theory, concerned with the creation of the subject through the individual's relation with the world, the Lacanian-inspired British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott (1971) found he needed to deal with both beauty and terror in considering the development of cultural experience. Beauty and terror, he suggested, meet in the imaginative space of the infant where play and creativity flourish, a place that is neither inside nor outside the child, "the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived." The absence, destruction or invasion of this imaginative space is the cause of uncontrollable terror, while its reinforcement nourishes the child's confidence in herself, the outside world and her capacities to deal with this world physically, socially and imaginatively.

I think it is worth insisting on the variety of these thinkers' ideas on beauty and terror, because perhaps the oldest and most persistent linking of beauty with terror—the story of Odysseus and the Sirens (Homer's *Odyssey* XII, 39) with the legend that the beauty of the siren song leads humans to destruction—seems superficially to be another sexist variation on the *femme fatale* myth. The "terror of beauty" story reappears throughout the centuries down to its formulaic debasement in the femme-fatale and temptress/bitch-goddess in Hollywood films and contemporary television series.

Why Woman Does Not Exist

The debasement comes from the projection of the subject's fear of the Lacanian Real into a psychotic reading of the Other's behavior. As Slavoj

Zizek (1991) explains the mechanism: "The destiny of the femme fatale in *film noir* [...] exemplifies perfectly the Lacanian proposition that 'Woman does not exist': she is nothing but 'the symptom of man,' her power of fascination masks the void of her nonexistence, so that when she is finally rejected, her whole ontological consistency is dissolved."
I'd even suggest that the "nonexistence" of the woman in such projections is a clue that the myth is not to be analyzed sexually. Similarly, if we go back to the original Oedipal story, the precipitating incidents come from the father's efforts to kill or ignore his son, not from Oedipus. If we read Freud as attempting to introduce Darwinian theory into the psychology of the subject, the Oedipus complex springs from the son realizing that the father's death is necessary to gain access to the pack's females and learning that he himself risks death so that the father can continue to live, but, at the same time, realizing that neither of these killings can take place (except in Dostoevsky). Death, of the father or the son, is the price of life, but "unthinkable," i.e., continually resurfacing in thought. Not for nothing is Oedipus partially disabled (with a club foot). Even the (forbidden) Freudian attraction of the mother, on this reading, is a screen for the iron logic of filiacide vs patricide. Portrayals of the bitch-goddess in popular culture in many cases seem more accurately applied to a dominating, enchanting, unpredictably violent Father for whom the Mother substitute is just a mask.

Not the least interesting aspect of the path-breaking television series *Six Feet Under*, which starts with the death of a father that eventually also kills his most potent (i.e. heterosexual) son by forcing him to take on the head-of-family role, is that the bitch-goddess figure to whom the son is most psychologically drawn (Brenda) resists all male projections of the conventional vamp—one might say that she resolutely rejects nonexistence—while the real femme fatale (Lisa) kills the son (Nate) with domesticity, rejection (suicide) and parenthood. Significantly, Alan Ball, the creator of the series, has said he wanted to finally bring the ubiquity and inevitability of death into a mainstream drama series, and the closing episode in which every main character meets their death was entitled "Everyone's Waiting." What seems at first to be a family's despairing search for sexual fulfillment and the standard Hollywood "creation of the couple" turns out to be about the devices (such as rushing towards excitement) that we use to avoid thinking of death (which always comes).

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Escaping our Fate

Primed by Freud to be suspicious of the beautiful, alerted by Kant to recognize the invincibility of Nature, encouraged by Winnicott to see the playful (even Trickster) side of all heroic presentations, persuaded by Lacan via Zizek to ignore the genderization of myths, we can reread the Siren story as demonstrating the multiple subterfuges required to stave off the intrusion of the horrifying, enticing Real (represented by catastrophe) into our narratives: Odysseus has himself strapped to the mast of his ship and blocks the ears of his rowing crew with beeswax. Odysseus here is in the same position as Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, or the artist who chooses to hear the Sirens' song and courts disaster, while others remain deaf to its enchantments.

The association between beauty and terror can also be seen in its perversion. Almost every regime of terror seeks to give its actions an aesthetic gloss. Nazi aesthetics, with its pseudo-classicism, attacks on "degenerate" art and promotion of a "heroic" brutalism, were as much part of its ideology as its glorification of uniforms and parades in service of a terror-based society. The perversion is to seek to beautify terror and terrifying experiences. This aestheticization reaches deep into Hollywood and into academic criticism (the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, are usually discussed in terms of Steven Spielberg's skill in creating beautiful shots out of horrific experience, imitating the photographs of Robert Capa).

It's a device that works. Napoleon and the Nazis remain of abiding interest (at least to British television). Tyrannies with no aesthetic gloss, such as Milosevic's pan-Serbism or Rwanda's interahamwe groups, are seen as particularly barbaric in modern history.

The Terror Haunting The Present

This still leaves unanswered the question: what is the terror that beauty acts as a screen for? The answer, I think, is time, i.e. entropy

and its various forms (fate, death, indifference, catastrophe, invincibility). Even the quietest "beautiful" paintings, such as Vermeer's interiors and domestic views, seem permeated with a recognition of the fragility of the moment—starting with the light, the insistence on the instant being viewed, and the many pointers to both the past and the future that haunt the immediate scene[1].

Caravaggio was the master of this tightrope walk over the yawning gulf of the present. The swagger of his street-smart urchins, despite their confidence, does not cloak the temporary nature of their self-deluded victories over time. Similarly, I cannot see Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-3) without hearing in my mind the continually changing traffic noises and drama that its formalism, deliberately or not, evokes through the kaleidoscope of colours. The terror, even when it is not depicted in these paintings, co-exists with the beauty, while the beauty holds the focus of our attention away from the terror.

Perhaps this is easier for us to see because contemporary artists, since Joseph Beuys, have brought unstable or impermanent materials deliberately to the forefront in their work (certainly we do not need to paint a distorted skull at the bottom of a canvas as Holbein did with *The Ambassadors*). Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin have given these modern practices general currency and widespread fame. More immediately poignant for me, perhaps because less theatrical in inspiration, are the bio-sculptures of Joann Goldin and the before-and-after work photos of Res Stolkiner (both of whom have been or are students at the European Graduate School in the Media and Communications Division).

Culture and Consciousness

Beauty is, of course, a suspect category, particularly among artists, who in my experience tend to reject its application to their work. They prefer terms like "interesting," "aesthetically worth exploring" or "an idea to play with" in talking of what they were trying to do in their work. Picasso seems to have been speaking for all of them when he said: "I do not seek, I find."

For an explanation, we can go to the philosopher Nelson Goodman (1976), who has disentangled some of the contradictions in the use of

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the term “beautiful”: “Folklore has it that the good picture is pretty. At the next higher level, ‘pretty’ is replaced by ‘beautiful,’ since the best pictures are often obviously not pretty. But again, many of them are in the most obvious sense ugly. If the beautiful excludes the ugly, beauty is no measure of aesthetic merit; but if the beautiful may be ugly, then ‘beauty’ becomes only an alternative and misleading word for aesthetic merit.”

For me, this does not go far enough. It skates over the fundamental social judgment involved in the labelling of something in aesthetic terms. Daniel C. Dennett (1998) points out: “Lovely qualities cannot be defined independent of the proclivities, susceptibilities, or dispositions of a class of observers. Actually that is a bit too strong. Lovely qualities *would* not be defined—there would be no point in defining *them*, in contrast to all other logically possible gerrymandered properties—independently of such a class of observers” (this seems to be one reason why artists refuse attempts to label their work “beautiful”).

Nevertheless, “beautiful” is widely applied to all kinds of objects and events, including some surprising categories, and attempts to disentangle the implications have produced the new field of philosophical study known as the aesthetics of everyday life (see Light and Smith, 2005, on food, weather, sport, etc, where what is experienced seems closer to the sublime than the Kantean “agreeable”). The work I’ve seen so far all seems open to Dennett’s objection—they ignore the essential social dimension of the term’s use. How serious a shortcoming this is, I hope to demonstrate. In fact, I do not think we can appreciate the full implications of such categorization unless we take the social control over its use into account, and I’ll try to show what we gain by incorporating this aspect and seeing how this shifts the terms of the debate.