

What is Beautiful?

When asking people to explain how they feel about a certain piece of art, they will likely need a moment to indicate whether they like it or not. Various people have various opinions about one piece of art. However, the work of art does not change per viewer. Then why is it that certain pieces appeal to one?

Beauty is often considered as aesthetics, which can be translated in a work of art, such as a painting or a built object. Many authors have discussed beauty, as early as in ancient Greece. Plato, for example, discussed beauty often. Both Plato and Aristotle regard beauty as an objective concept. Thus, beauty is not dependent of the reaction of a beholder.

Nowadays, many philosophers still write about the same subject. Amongst them are a number of well known philosophers, such as Kant and Hume. They both spoke about beauty from the aspect of taste. Kant's writings contradict the statement of Plato and Aristotle and states that beauty is, and judgements of it, are subjective. In addition, he states that one can only judge beauty when it, e.g., a piece of art, is subject to our own eyes.

Finally, Leon Battista Alberti's definition of beauty is as follows: "the harmony of all parts in relation to one another". Elaborates on this by explaining that beauty is the one thing that decreases in beauty, when a thing is added to it, or taken from it. "*Wat doet die rode vlek daar links boven*"¹

However, it is not only philosophers who have written about beauty, so do artists. They have different theories on the same subject. A combination of a philosophical approach and a scientific approach are described in the book "*Mooie dingen*"²

This essay will aim to shed lights on the ambiguities surrounding beauty in art. And compare these thoughts of art with architecture. In order to do so, various approaches will be considered. A closer look is taken at a number of different psychological approaches. The concept of aesthetics is explained, and so is the impact of shapes and patterns on our brain. Then, the concept of beauty and its stem in nature is explained. And finally, the connection between beauty and architecture is established. This psychological approach is inspired by the book "*De kunst verstaan*"³ by Annelies van Meel-Jansen.

The things we think or feel to be logical do not have to be logical to the brain. In 1984, Vladimir Konecni conducted research with 60 pictures of existing figurative and non-figurative works of art. In his study, 120 people rated the artworks that were not necessarily shown in the position they were intended. The figurative pieces were in some cases rotated and even mirrored. The non-figurative works were shown with their original name or a fictitious mismatched name. It resulted in the fact that the figurative pieces were elected above the non-figurative works. Mirroring or rotating the piece did not seem to effect the judgement. As for the names the ones made up seem to be getting more attention. Konecni concluded that the message of the pictures is useless to the viewer.

¹ Zijlstra, Onno, *wat doet die rode vlek daar linksboven*, (Arnhem,Terra, 2007)

² Nierop van, Maarten, Vall van de, Renee, Schoot van der, Albert, *mooie dingen*, (Meppel, Boom, 1993)

³ Meel-Jansen van, Annelies, *De kunst verstaan*, (Assen, Van Gorcum, 1988)

When a design or art piece in a book is altered in its size, colour, or even only in detail, we can still relish that piece. Thus, the aesthetic does not appear to be based on the isolated aspect of the art, but on information from a higher order; the interplay of different aspects.

In 1981, Eysenck tested 21.060 people by asking what their favourite colour is. The results were blue, red, green, violet, orange, and yellow. The colours were appreciated in this exact written order. Lindauer (1981) formed a list of words that people tend to use when defining a piece. Most of these words were feelings and especially feelings of tension or calm, e.g., contemplative, insight, transcendence, and unity. The research of both Eysenck and Lindauer show that the experience people have is difficult to define. There appear to be ambiguities between the distinction of what we see, feel and think. A blue building can attract us by its colour, but the shape can give us a feeling of tension. The experience of art is variable and difficult to define and its effect on a spectator is impossible to tell. This causes a problem on two parts, namely the unity of an art piece and the inner feelings of the spectator.

The inner feelings of the spectator or the aspect of experience is hard to define, as stated above. In any case, the artist has the privilege to translate the conscious and unconscious emotions into a piece, which can later be observed by others. Artists do not delete feelings, but rather share their fantasies with the public. Art is created by bringing temper, emotions, and fantasies to a higher level. This level is reached by transforming these elements into recognisable shapes. A building that is designed with emotions transformed into shapes is the Volkshalle designed by Albert Speer. The building is immensely big in order to indicate Hitler's power and to provide the people with a void feeling upon seeing and entering the building. Negative feelings are not only displayed in buildings, but also in different forms of art.

"Mark Prent is an artist who makes shocking, sadomasochistic, irritating and fascinating art. [...] One of his art pieces is a water tank with two men inside. One is strangling the other man who is already bounded with his hand and feet. Prent used real hair and even made realistic veins. [...] The pieces seem to be dead if you look at the colour of the skin. But the men also have something lively."⁴

It even looks as though the men are breathing. The piece evokes a feeling of defence to the spectator; we do not want to experience what we have just seen. Immediately, the feeling of fear takes over the inner thoughts. These feelings are cooled down by the fact that we are in the position of the innocent bystander. The fear does not only bring the feeling of aggression but also the feeling of empathy.

The same feelings happen upon us when we think about the Volkshalle, where a person is merely an innocent bystander. When thinking about the Second World War, we feel empathy for the people who were suppressed by the power of Hitler. Architecture can thus be considered a work of art, with similar effects.

⁴ Meel-Jansen van, Annelies, *De kunst verstaan*, (Assen, Van Gorcum, 1988), p.174 Translation by Author

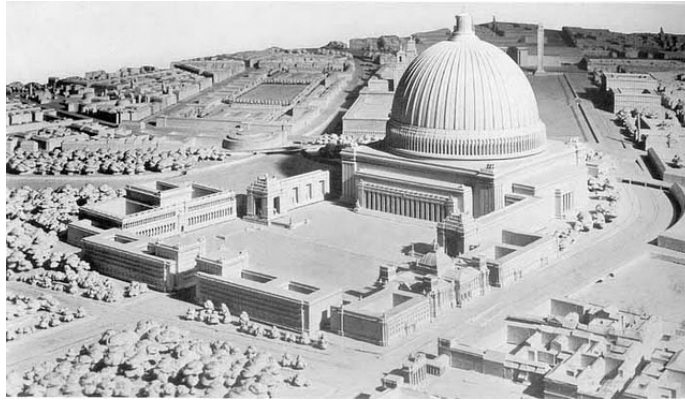


Figure 1: Volkshalle planned to be build in Berlin. Designed by Albert Speer. Commissioned by Adolf Hitler. Picture taken by an unknown person around 1936

Psychoanalysts look at the emotional feeling of an art piece, but are often criticised, because they only focus on emotions and leave the formal appreciation of art out. These emotional analyses in combination with the previous analyses of Eysenck and Lindauer provide insight in what is experienced when seeing certain forms of art. However, emotional feelings and their definitions are not the only way to describe experiences, as will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Art seems to be doing something to our body which cannot be controlled. Clive Bell (1913) tells us that art is not only a collection of feelings. According to Bell, "art is able to place people outside the world of human activity, and place them into a world of beauty. For an instance, people are able to shut off human interests and memories. In the moment, we are lifted above it all."⁵ Moreover, Bell explains that aesthetics make up an important part of experience. According to him, aesthetics are based on shapes. Shapes emphasise the importance of order, complexity, and the underlying intercommunication.

"Nature is the place where people first started have the feeling of something beautiful. This because of that the nature has an enormous scale of different shapes. Some are erratic like old trees or rock formations. And others have simple and clear shapes like the hexagon shape of a honeycomb [...] and the two sided symmetry of the human body. [...]"⁶

Kepes (1966) said that in organising daily activities, people have copied the feeling of nature, such as regularity, completion, polishing, symmetrical, and modular organizing. Organizing has a special psychological value; information that is well organized and has a good structure is easier to digest and remember than unorganized information. There is a hidden rhythmic order in everyday life, displayed in activities such as walking or breathing. People tend to build in different structures in order to organize and have a certain overview on life. This tendency also reflects in the way buildings are designed, e.g., the division of windows in a facade. The windows are placed on a regular rather than an irregular manner. Also, the steps on stairs are separated by the same height. Order is often called and perceived to be beautiful.

Besides practical manners, order also has mental significance. People realise that nature is not only clearly discernible order, but has also a large hidden order. This can be seen in things like the change of seasons and the routes the planets move in. Discovering the hidden order and harmony of the world gives people the feeling of understanding the

⁵ Ibid, p.178 Translation by Author

⁶ op cit, p.178 Translation by Author

universe's plan. The artist or designer has to create his own order and harmony with the resources available to him. This order can be translated into recognisable shapes, in which case it is easier for the bystander to digest what the artist is trying to share. This has a positive effect on the feeling one gets, resulting in a higher appreciation of the work.

The emotional view of arts has been explained so far and we now know that art relates to shapes seen in nature. In the next section, a different explanation for the need for structure is proved. It is possible that shapes are based on what we have learned from nature and that nature is the reason why we tend to focus on patterns, rather than individual elements. On the contrary, gestalt-psychologists think that not only nature is the reason people enjoy seeing patterns. According to them, the brain has a need to organize the incoming information in the most simple and economical way. This fixed order replaces chaos with inner calm in times of constant changes. The need for order can also be seen as restoring the inner balance, rather than merely looking for the hidden order in the world.

Although people value the calm, order, and clarity, we are equally looking for change, movement, and new impressions. This focus of change can be seen in the fact how the brain reacts to monotone actions. When something is always the same, the brain is trained to blur out that no longer interesting part, such as the Dutch vinex areas. At first, it was new and exciting to live in such an area. Later on these areas were designed in almost every city. At that point the brain was beginning to blur out the vinex; it was no longer interesting to the brain. When an image is optical stabilised, there will be a decrease in eyesight. This effect can also be used on purpose in a design.

Berlyne (1971) stated that art is a way of communication that transforms information from the artist to the spectator. The information given is the information that the artist believes to be interesting. This can vary between things that attracted his attention, what is appealing in his eyes, what gave him strong feeling, or what made him contemplate. The information of an art piece is not directly transferred, but is shown through a collection of iconic symbols. Berlyne senses that art can be captured as a stimulus pattern, which can be of positive nature, and can give a feeling of pleasance.

Looking at objects can give an impulse to the activation level of the brain. Whenever somebody's activation level rises, different psycho-physiological will occur. This will give a change in the movement, muscles, and sensory sensitivity. In this case, the body is prepared to take action. Another part of the brain can decrease the activation level whenever that impulse given to the brain. These impulses can be any sensory sensitivity, intellectual impulse of emotional excitement.

According to Berlyne, "three important aspects regulate the brain's activation. The first is the psycho-physiological influence, e.g., especially loud sounds or bright colours. Also, abrupt movements or quick changes will lead to higher activation than continuous movements. Next are the ecological influences on brain activation, such as a sudden pain. Finally, the brain's activation is regulated by something, rather than observing a well-known object."⁷

Whether the activation is seen as unpleasant or pleasant depends on the already existing activation level. When placing Prent's work into the perspective of Berlyne's research, both the ecological reaction and the comparison feeling can be identified.

Another research by Berlyne (1971) explains that things that activate just a little bit or a really big part are often seen as unpleasant. People seem to enjoy a mixture of familiar and new elements. A low level of activation is unpleasant, but when the level of activation rises, people experience the situation as pleasant. Though, when a certain point of the activation

⁷ Ibid, p.181-182 Translation by Author

level is reached, these pleasant feelings will cease. At which point, people will feel less comfortable, but things are still perceived as interesting. This idea underlines the theories from the gestalt- psychologists that explained that the brain blurs out the monotone aspects.

Both order and tension or simplicity and complexity have their value to the aesthetic experience. Thus, the experience of aesthetic perfection is a balance between the opposite factors.

The feeling of beauty is different to every person. It is easy to judge a thing and tell whether you like it or not. But to tell exactly why you think is beautiful is a difficult task. Even psychologists have different opinions about how to define what beauty is and how we develop the feeling if we like a piece or not. One thing they all agree on is the fact that it is based on a feeling.

People seem to have a preference for colours that evokes certain feelings. This colour alone, we cannot judge. In order to formulate an opinion, the colour needs a shape to speak to the bystander. We can describe the feeling the shape and colour tell us in a word that does not totally match the feeling but does reassemble it. Even if that feeling is negative it does not assure that we cannot like that piece anymore.

We need to remember that an art piece is something made by an artist, trying to translate his feeling to a public. Using shapes and colours help to define those feelings. If we can relate to what the artist tries to convey, there is a big chance we like that piece.

We try to think about what we see but we cannot control what happens in our brain. Bell (1913) tells us that our memories are blocked whilst judging a piece. But how is it then possible to feel something such as fear, when watching a design? How can we compare an emotion like fear if there is nothing as a memory to compare it with?

As stated before, if information is well organized it is easier to digest. The theory of order suggests that people are striving for order and clarity. Theories such as those by Berlyne (1971) suggest that people are striving for an optimal tension, complexity, and excitement. Both theories are based on a certain degree of consistency in the need of the human being. Sometime people need a calm moment, but seconds later this need can change in to a need of excitement. Therefore, the question may rise whether people really have this stability need? If so, does that mean that one moment we like a piece and the other moment we dislike it? Aesthetic experience is not only linked to the nature of the work, but also to the mental state the spectator is in. This does in fact mean that our opinion can change in a moment. The first time we see a building, it is possible that we like the design. When this design is copied, we tend to lose interest. Eventually there will become a point where we will have completely lost interest.

Architecture is a form of art; it makes use of colours, order, symmetry, and etc. Then, if we would take into account the recently gathered knowledge, would the Volkshalle be more appreciated if it were painted blue? The primary aim of the building was to impress and even slightly scare people, therefore the building would lose its credibility. Speer translated the power over Hitler to a massive building, overwhelming the viewer. The building forces people to feel small and the regularity of the building makes it easy to read. The history of the building is awful and will likely transfer a similar feeling onto the spectators. The building did indeed send the message that Speer wanted to send to the bystander. This perfect translation is what makes a building beautiful. It seems that Bell is right; we feel fear, but that is exactly what Speer wanted to convey. Even if we could compare that feeling with a memory, the design will remain beautiful. The Volkshalle is placed at the end of a courtyard, thereby creating a tension between the outside and the inside, a thing Berlyne suggests we strive for. If the building would be copied, it will lose its status due to the monotone effect that will occur. So would adding anything to it. It will then no longer be beautiful.