

Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death

Edited by James Swearingen and Joanne Cutting-Gray

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What does “extreme beauty” look like? Even more importantly, what does it *feel* like? These questions are the main themes around which James Swearingen and Joanne Cutting-Gray have constructed their anthology *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death* (Continuum, 2002). Such a title will no doubt call up strong associations with the work of the French critics who began writing in the late 1960’s. Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Baudrillard, and Barthes, among others, were attempting in various ways “to think otherwise”—to develop a way of thinking that did justice to the kinds of changes they were noticing in the society around them, especially as reflected in its artwork. Barthes, for example, wrote about the relation between pleasure and literature found in the experience of “difference.” Beyond pleasure he discovered bliss, a feeling that overcame the difference between pleasure and pain and included boredom, pain, and unpleasantness; beyond literature he found the text, the work of art unmoored from its ideological and historical context. This is the area within which the essays of the present anthology can be found.

Mario Perniola’s “Feeling of Difference” is the lead article of the anthology, introducing its general thematic; it is the only article in part one. Perniola looks to Barthes’ work for his guiding question: How can we release sensations, affections, and emotions from the tyranny of the “I feel” in order to find experiences that are different from and extraneous to conventional feeling? In order to answer the question, Perniola applies the phenomenological concept of the *epoche* to Barthes’ task. He consequently shows how, if we learn to disconnect ourselves emotionally from whatever situation we are in, we will be able to gain some control over its categories. Turning for an example of this disconnection to the subject of sex, Perniola recognizes the possibility of disconnecting it from the tyranny of orgasm and from male/female distinctions and locates “the sex appeal of the inorganic.” With this phrase he means to refer to how an individual might discover its body to be that of a thing, as for example a piece of clothing or an electronic device. The person thus becomes an extraneous body, deprived of subjective

experience. This is analogous to being in a state of psychosis whereby one becomes what one sees, hears, and touches. This phenomenon, says Perniola, is also reflected by a contemporaneous art work that has become its own reality, totally disconnected from any external or “real world” references. Referring to this phenomenon as “psychotic realism,” he calls attention to art works in which music becomes sound, theater action, film self-referential electronic images, and painting mere visual and tactile effect. Such art no longer initiates reality, but becomes its own reality. Looking for a way out of conventional feeling, we find in such postmodern art the total disconnection from art as imitation. Where there is no longer any attempt to represent or reflect on the human drama, we are left only with the negative effects such art can have.

Following Perniola’s essay, the editors divide their work into five additional sections, to which they give the following titles: art and the turn to the postmodern, the impossible place of literature, the rhetoric of the political, the political and the imaginary and extreme beauty–death, glory. In what follows, the editors take a widely diverse range of essays and attempt to shoehorn them into their structured vision.

In part two, however, the focus is still reasonably tight. In this section, the ways in which surrealism, the avant-garde, and minimalism disrupt the ontology of aesthetic objects are covered by a) Jean-Michel Rabate’s analysis of how Breton’s surrealism as a critique of modernism is a synthesis of love and revolution due to its subversion of Hegelian categories away from history and towards Spirit; b) Dalia Judovitz’s description of Duchamp’s aesthetic practice as an attempt to defer the “pictorial becoming” of an appropriated artistic icon or form by creating anti-works that challenge our knowledge of the visual through our feeling a vertigo of delay rather than a vertigo of acceleration; and c) Peter Williams’ defense of minimalism, in which he explains how its practitioners (like Stella and Beckett) embrace the “now” by subtracting representational elements from their work and by shifting their poetics away from rational categories and determining judgments.

The essays in part three, in contrast, are less obviously joined together. Although their focus is clearly directed to three different strategies of “reading” a text, the texts themselves range over a disconcertingly broad territory, from Plato’s *Republic* and *Timaeus*, to Blanchot’s reading of Proust, to Cronenberg’s film of Ballard’s novel *Crash*. As the essays draw us closer to the gap between literature and the void of its perpetual becoming, the relation between this “gap” and “extreme beauty” becomes somewhat clearer.

The three essays again present strategies of disruption, like in the previous section. Max Statkiewicz thus examines the concept of *mimesis* (or imitation) in the political context of social space in order to contrast the static emplacement of individuals by their leaders of the class-oriented ideal society of the *Republic* with the ambiguous emplacement of *khora* (or social status) established by the more democratic processes presented in the *Timaeus*. Statkiewicz then points to feminist strategies of reading and writing (like those of Irigaray, Butler, and Kristeva) as working within the subversive questioning established by this ambiguity. In the following essay, Pierre Lamarche introduces the concept of boredom as something disruptive, by way of Blanchot's reading of Proust. Boredom is thus linked to idleness or worklessness (*desoeuvrement*), as that which opens up the space of literature into the realm of the infinite. Since the plenitude of experienced reality can only lead to the creative paralysis of the writer trying to embrace it, Proust's vast work is consequently seen as an ongoing delay from the act of actually writing something *real*. Its greatness lies in the very effacement of this mundane reality in favor of something infinitely more rich and sustained. In the final essay of the section, Joel Black investigates how both the film and novel *Crash* are attempts to eroticize the inanimate. In this case the ability of a specific machine, the automobile, to main and kill the human body, is what excites erotic feeling (as real car crashes obviously do not). The film version extends Baudrillard's idea of *hyperreality* to the theme of eroticizing the inanimate. When it then includes the scattering of bionic versions of human body parts, the *simulacrum* of the machine world threatens to become all-encompassing. What is disrupted in this last essay is our sense of being in control of the technology we use.

The next two sections focus on more explicitly political issues. In the fourth section, a couple of articles on Hannah Arendt seem only tangentially related to the postmodern concerns of the anthology as a whole. The first deals with her relationship with Heidegger and serves as an occasion to explore their different readings of Aristotle about what constitutes correct political speech. The second deals with her appropriation of ancient and modern literature to her overarching concern with social and political issues. The following essay, which applies a reading of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* to an effort to understand how fascism leads to the marginalization and eventual eradication of otherness, seems more germane. The fifth section, in turn, presents two articles on the post-colonial concerns of the Aboriginal people of Australia. The work of Deleuze and Guattari is again introduced

in order to illustrate how the modern sovereign state operates to capture and deterritorialize its indigenous people, and to explore the responsibility of present-day non-indigenous people for the past activities of the state within which they live. A third article is an attempt to understand Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* as a post-colonial critique of colonialism by way of the confusion and disgust of its narrator about the actions of the imperialist Kurtz. Although these articles are certainly interesting in themselves, one has to wonder what they have to do with the issue of "extreme beauty."

The final section marks a welcome return to the central themes of the anthology. The first essay is an analysis by Robert Burch of Perniola's reading of Heidegger and Baudrillard on death. Perniola accuses Heidegger of maintaining a metaphysics of death, even in the face of his attempt to overcome it. He contrasts Heidegger's essentially Lutheran call of conscience in the face of death, which he argues is a kind of looking for faith, with Baudrillard's Jesuit/baroque indifference conceived as an act of will. The latter, says Burch, is grounded in Hegelian skeptical consciousness and is in response to the "little deaths" which are part of everyday existence. In the second essay Kenneth Itzkowitz asks whether death can be a gift, and if so, what kind? Derrida is aligned with Kierkegaard and Bataille in answering that a gift must be understood as the sacrifice of the good, as in the example of the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice to God of his son Isaac. Itzkowitz asks, in turn, what is gained by such an inversion? The fate of the other—especially with regard to the societal embrace of righteousness that either includes or excludes otherness—is key to his analysis. The final essay, both of the section and of the whole anthology, is a treatment of Bettino Berga of the concept of glory in Levinas and Derrida. Glory marks a limit for Levinas between the secular and the religious. It is the essence of infinity, within the complex structure of substitution, whereby the identity of the subject is displaced by the unassimilable other. Because for Levinas ethics is recognized as first philosophy, when understood by Derrida as the experience of the sublime carried over to the ineffable, it can also be located in the feeling of extreme beauty, as well as within the attempt to think otherwise.

Certain philosophical themes recur often throughout the anthology. The themes of difference, death, the postmodern, the simulacrum, and otherness, find their way into many of the different essays, as do references to Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the French critics listed above. Such cross-references help to maintain a focus that all too easily can be obfuscated by the sheer number of different autho-

rial points of view presented. The editors have done a heroic job keeping the whole from falling apart at the seams. All the same, the theme of the political doesn't seem to conjoin effectively with the aesthetic and ethical focus of the anthology as a whole.

Reviewed by Steve Bindeman