Aesthetics and Utopia
Nathan Wood

The concepts of beauty and justice have been entwined ever since Plato claimed their mutual association to the Good. For Plato, to speak of the beautiful was to refer to the ultimate source of beauty’s value, which of course must be another Form and one uniquely positioned to give beauty it’s goodness without, in some sense, existing at the same level as the Form of beauty. The connection between ‘beauty’ and ‘goodness’ seems obvious. The term ‘beauty’ can bring to mind pleasant feelings and pictures of magnificent scenery and vivid arrays of colors. The powerful emotions we experience when confronted with beauty resemble equally passionate feelings associated with concerns of justice. This feeling not only arises in acts of disobedience and protest, but when we read stories about harmonious coexistence amongst human beings or when we ourselves dream of what such a harmonious existence would look like. It is not an overstatement to say that a just world is a beautiful world; that we believe there to exist a deep connection between the just and the beautiful. In other words, if the just world were a painting it would implore the viewer to breathe a sigh of relief. The just world is beautiful in large part because it is a world where the stains of unnecessary suffering and unfair privilege have been wiped from the social canvas.

Before diving into the problem that this paper tries to clarify, it will be helpful to refer to some pieces of artwork that will, hopefully, give us the feeling that we are concerned with here. There are many different kinds of art and within each kind of art and there are an equal variety of kinds of artworks. Painting, sculpture, music, and pottery are kinds of art, whereas impressionism, cubism, and surrealism are kinds of artworks. I want to focus on a specific kind of artwork that I’ll label ‘resonant artworks’, but this label applies to works of art in a unique and specific way. A resonant artwork is a work of art that captures our gaze, refuses to release our attention, and profoundly shifts us at our core. It is the aesthetic feeling that this piece of art has put on display something so deep inside us that we are paralyzed. To help clarify this concept, we can starkly contrast ‘resonant art’ from what could be called ‘entertaining art’, though I do not intend these to be exhaustive terms. In large part the distinction is an intuitive one, but I will attempt to demonstrate the distinction. Entertaining art is pleasant or pleasurable in the moment, but holds no deeper personal significance once one is done looking at the painting or listening to the song. What I include under ‘resonant art’, though, are works that paralyze you when you come into contact even if you do walk away it follows you like your shadow.

It may seem to some that all art does this, or at least is capable of doing this. However, this is not the case. Art can be appreciated for many different values. It can be funny, clever, disturbing, beautiful, relaxing, pleasant, or resonant. Vincent Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” or his “self-portrait” are examples of resonant artwork, so are Picasso’s “Guernica” and Francisco de Goya’s “Tres de Mayo”. But take the example of Andy Warhol’s “Tomato Soup”. This artwork does not appear to elicit the same kind
of aesthetic feeling as Van Gogh, Picasso, or Goya's work, rather it is a clever commentary on consumerism and advertising. All that I aim to establish now is that there is a unique aesthetic phenomenon that attaches only to certain pieces of art and is not a criterion of something's being a piece of art to begin with.

The claim of this paper is simple, but I believe profoundly problematic. However, before laying out the bare structure of the problem I would like to set up the point with a very poignant passage from Peter Singer, who writes:

There is a tragic irony in the fact that we can find our own fulfillment precisely because there is so much avoidable pain and suffering in the universe, but that is the way the world is ... How we would find meaning in our lives if all avoidable pain and suffering had been eliminated is an interesting topic for philosophical discussion, but the question is, sadly, unlikely to have any practical significance for the foreseeable future.¹

What makes this passage relevant is the tragic irony that Singer mentions at the beginning and end. He acknowledges the question, but moves on to other pressing matters. The tragic irony he points to here is a possible tension between living ethically and achieving a meaningful existence and I would like to discuss an analogous problem. While beauty in itself may necessarily contain a pleasing aspect to it many of the great works of beauty throughout human history have attained such status because of the injustice of the world their creators lived in. What transformed the mere paint upon the canvas into something truly beautiful and moving was the impetus for creating the picture; more specifically the suffering, dissatisfaction, and tension between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be underlying the artwork.

At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, the problem can be most easily seen in three claims that create a significant tension between art on the one hand and social justice on the other. First, “resonant art” requires the existence of suffering in order to shed light upon certain characteristics of the human condition. Second, political justice necessarily involves the minimization of pain and suffering in the world.² Third, and in conclusion, a just world cannot in principle contain resonant art, since the pursuit of justice undercuts a necessary pre-condition for resonant art. If this is correct, then those of us engaged in fighting for political justice must ask ourselves what the costs of achieving such an end involve. To put the conclusion another way, justice and resonant art appear to be incompatible values that a person could pursue; progress within one domain spells decline within the other.³ Typically when the concept of 'utopia' is invoked it is to inform us of all that is to be gained, but what I would like to ask instead is what is there to be lost?

¹ Singer, Peter. How Are We to Live? Prometheus Books, Amherst, 1995; p. 222.
² Though this need not be all that justice accomplishes.
³ At this point all that I am arguing is that there is an inverse correlation between the two, not that there is a direct correlation. The distinction is that a small increase in justice does not in itself entail an equally small decrease in meaningful art.
The world viewed through the lens of a utopia is a radically different world than the one we currently inhabit. But it is not one so radical that it is completely incomprehensible to understand, no matter how distant we may be from such a world. It is here that I would like to pose a supplementary question that helps motivate the case for the problematic disparity between justice and aesthetic resonance. Imagine that we currently lived in a utopia where there was no war, no unnecessary suffering, no unfairness, no economic poverty, and no dissatisfaction with the way the world is. For it is as perfect as it could possibly be. What would the predominate attitude of such a civilization be? What attitude is left other than a total and complete complacence? I certainly do not mean to imply that such a society doesn’t contain joy, sadness, excitement, or tragedy. Many of the sources of joy and excitement would still exist and we will of course still be mortal. There will still be lovers and the other hearts they will break. But the characteristic feature of complacence is a peaceful acceptance of the present. A utopia couldn’t help but inspire this feeling. Given this attitude of complacency, what would be the reason to create art in the ideally just world? The minimal amount of suffering that occurs is capable of being remedied in large part through certain institutions equally available to everyone who finds themselves in such sorrowful circumstances. The function of creating art could not be to bring to attention the unjust and ugly characteristics of human society that plague us nowadays. Street art might take the form of simply bringing the contents of museums out to the public, though of course only on designated buildings where permission was granted. All in all, art would most likely serve the function of entertainment as well as an informative role in depicting faraway landscapes and ancient cultures and civilizations. One important motivation for a Van Gogh or Picasso to paint the moving and profound paintings they did was that there existed a lack of some sort. Van Gogh, a penniless miscreant, found solace in his paintbrush strokes mixing colors of all sorts to give the mundane world the dreamlike symbolism that has come to be characteristic of his style. If he were to have been given a steady income as a farmer would he have created those stunning portraits? We will never know for sure, of course, but it is interesting to speculate as to why he would be motivated to depict the world in such a stunning way on his canvas. Perhaps he would have painted them anyways, but they would have been done out of a curiosity of mixing paints in such a manner or to try something new and unique. A large part of the significance of his paintings, however, is the dreamlike quality these paintings have and what that fact says about the mind of Van Gogh; perhaps that if the world is a dream, then the pain and loneliness within it is not real.

This is one way in which resonant art may be impossible within a utopia, but there is another sense in which it is anachronistic to such a world. Imagine now that a stockpile of paintings hidden away from the world have resurfaced and are to be exhibited at a gallery for the citizenry to see and experience. It turns out that three pieces were found in good condition, the rest badly damaged. One of the artworks is a replica of Picasso’s Guernica, the second piece is Francisco de Goya’s The Third of May, and the final piece is Vincent Van Gogh’s Café Terrace at Night. What would they
think of each painting? More specifically, what could they appreciate in each painting? Surely, those citizens could understand the array and use of colors and try to imagine disconnectedly what the mother in Picasso’s *Guernica* and saintly figure in Goya’s *The Third of May* were thinking and feeling at those moments, but could they truly appreciate the ideas and ideals being communicated by the weeping mother and the defiant figure dressed in white in Goya’s painting?

While there is a significant question as to whether the kind of resonant artwork we experience would be produced given such complacent conditions, the question posed now is even if such paintings and sculptures were created would they resonate? The tragedy and fear that is captured in *Guernica* is not simply the death and destruction of the city and its people, but that it was a cruel and vicious military attack upon a population of innocents. What do the citizens of a utopia know of such fear and despair? It is this question itself that gets to the heart of the matter. Experience appears to play a fundamental role in the appreciation of these resonant artworks. But it need not be direct or immediate experience. In the case of *Guernica*, one can surely appreciate to some degree the horror and fear instilled within that canvas even if one has never personally been in involved in an air raid attack or even involved in war. There is an important element of distance that impedes the resonant potential within an artwork. If a person is too far removed from certain conditions, then a chasm lies between them and the work of art. Those who live a life so disconnected from war, suffering, tragedy, and pain cannot possibly overcome that gap unless some experience can be had. But, of course, there exists no such route within a utopia.

Both art and justice reflect the human condition. Much has been made by Albert Camus and other philosophers that humans are in the absurd position of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only to have it fall back down just before reaching the summit. Humans certainly share some tragic features of Sisyphus’ position, but our tragedy is even more profound. Icarus is a more suitable mythological metaphor for representing the tragedy of human beings, especially because his story helps clarify the pertinent sense of tragedy for human beings that will become relevant to the connection between beauty and justice. Daedalus, the father of Icarus, was a brilliant architect kept in the service of King Minos to construct the famous labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur. After taking pity on Theseus and aiding in his escape from the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne, the King’s daughter, Daedalus and his son Icarus were threatened with their own imprisonment within the labyrinth; left to wander the corridors and stone passageways until eventually the Minotaur catches up and slaughters them. Daedalus creates a pair of wings for both himself and his son to fly out of the labyrinth and escape back to Sicily. The tragic human metaphor on display in this myth is that the unique capacity of human beings to create new ways of adapting to the world in order to escape its constraints and dangers are also the instruments of our own demise. The wings that gave Icarus the ability to fly, to escape from all the constraints of gravity and matter, were the same instruments that destroyed him; for the farther he flew from restriction and the closer he came to freedom the more the
wax melted and the feathers fell. Icarus is a more humanly tragic figure than Sisyphus because while he has his rock and a goal he continually is striving to accomplish, Icarus accomplished the goal but lost his humanity because of it.

If art is the struggle to understand human existence and the need to express the ironies and failures of that struggle motivate the creation of deeply moving and profound artworks, then in a world lacking much of that struggle is there a place for resonant art? Will we only find great art where there exists great turmoil? If so, then what of the pursuit of justice, which entails dissolving the impulse for resonant art?

This last question raises the issue of what this problem tells us about our understanding of the relationship between ethics, justice, and beauty. One reaction may be to somehow dissolve the problem entirely by abandoning the balance act of aesthetic meaningfulness on the one hand and the pursuit of justice on the other. Such an approach, however, would actually result in dissolving both sides because of the complexly intertwined relation between justice and beauty. In the earlier discussion of Plato there is a clear intertwined relation, but we need not go as far as Plato in placing a higher, yet functionally intermediate, form between the two. In fact, Plato’s theory of the forms seems a poor model to try and apply to the relation between justice and beauty that we seem to experience. On the Platonic model the common experience, or binding rope, between justice and beauty is a third term (goodness), but the intertwined experiences between justice and beauty that I mentioned earlier are intertwined because justice is beautiful and, in a certain sense, the beautiful is just. It seems to me that the former connection is less controversial than the latter in that there does seem to be something aesthetically pleasing about the just society. But what could it mean to say that beauty is just? An important characteristic that I have been attaching to each description of justice or the just society is that of harmony. For Plato this is essentially all that justice is, an ideal harmony amongst the three classes of human beings. All three classes functioning properly in respect to their different functions is what Plato means by harmony. A clock where all the different components contribute to the overall function of the mechanism is analogous to the individual human components that contribute to the overall functioning of the social mechanism. Beauty, then it would seem, can be said to be just because justice is essentially harmonious and this characteristic is an essential feature of beauty as well. But beautiful artworks need not be harmonious themselves, any Picasso or Dali painting will tell you that much. Harmony within the artwork, however, is not the important point. Justice necessarily involves people and

---

4 It should be mentioned that the interpretation of Plato that I am arguing against here is, like almost any interpretation of Plato it seems, controversial. There is some evidence to the contrary that Plato does not in some places view the Form of the Good as a higher, ultimate Form for all Forms. However, his analogy of the Sun strongly suggests this reading, while in earlier dialogues Plato does not seem to make this commitment. Here I am only rejecting the applicability of the interpretation supported by the analogy of the Sun.

5 In contemporary political philosophy harmony is not given such a central place within the conception of justice, but it is nevertheless given an important place within the concept of justice. For John Rawls, the most deserving of a paradigmatic association with the era of contemporary political philosophy, the notion of harmony is replaced with the idea of stability.
if beauty is to be justice in a certain sense then it also must have people involved in the equation somewhere. The place that people do fit in is through the promise of a means to harmony that resonant art provides to people. Resonant artwork fills a gap in human existence and the filling of that gap can provide a wholeness and harmony to a person’s existence. Therefore, because beauty provides a means towards a sense of harmony in an analogous fashion to that of justice the two share an essential structural feature and the two become even more entwined.

In this essay I have spent much time defending the existence of the problem because I anticipate that an immediate reaction will be to try and dissolve it away. Any attempt to do so, however, will run up against the problem of interrupting the interdependency of justice and aesthetic meaningfulness or beauty. Justice without beauty is uninspiring and beauty without the pursuit of justice seems pointless. The tension between the pursuit of justice and the growth of resonant art puts us in a very uncomfortable position of having to seriously reflect upon these competing values or find some way of living with the two of them pulling us in opposite directions.