

## Review: François Jullien, This Strange Idea of the Beautiful

### 书评：《美的奇特理念》-弗朗索瓦·于连

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#### Abstract

When we use the arts in therapy, do we understand what we are doing? Do we rely on the concept of art that comes from our aesthetic tradition? Or does our work put this concept into question?

François Jullien's book, *This Strange Idea of the Beautiful*, raises these questions in the reader's mind by interrogating the Western tradition of aesthetics through a comparative study with Chinese writings on classical landscape paintings. The Western concept of beauty, which underlies the whole metaphysical separation between the sensible and intelligible worlds, is put into question by seeing that when the Chinese literati have written about classical landscapes, they do not use the term "beautiful," which implies a disembodied ideal form that can be viewed at a distance from the spectator. Rather, they use a multiplicity of words which describe various aspects of the landscape, all of which draw the viewer into relationship with the work.

This review suggests that the use of expressive arts in therapy and education cannot base itself on the taken-for-granted concept of art which is embedded in our tradition. Rather, we must draw upon both Western and Eastern thinking in order to find a point of view which suits the actual practice of our work.

#### 摘要

当我们在治疗中使用艺术的时候，我们是否明白我们在做什么？我们是否依靠来自审美传统概念的艺术？抑或我们的工作对这个概念提出了疑问？

弗朗索瓦·于连的书《美的奇特理念》通过对中国关于古典风景画的著作的比较研究来探讨美学的西方传统，从而引发了读者对这些问题的思考。于连对美学的西方概念，强调感性和理性世界之间的整体性形而上学的分离提出质疑，因为书中提到当中国文人描写关于经典的风景时，他们不使用“美”这一术语，而这个词意味着从观察者角度远观产生的抽象的理想形式。同时，他们使用各种众多词语描述景观，把观众吸引到与作品的关系之中。

本书评建议，在艺术治疗和艺术教育领域应用表达性艺术时不能依靠植根于我们传统中的理所当然被接受的艺术概念。相反，我们必须找到一个角度，包含西方和东方的思想以适合我们工作的实际做法。

When we use the arts in therapy, do we understand what we are doing? Do we rely on the concept of art that comes from our aesthetic tradition? Or does our work put this concept into question?

These questions occurred to me after reading the book by François Jullien, who is both a contemporary French philosopher and a Sinologist who spent years in China studying the classical language, looking at Chinese landscape painting and familiarising himself with the writings about these works by the Chinese literati over the centuries. Jullien writes with the rare authority of someone who is totally *au courant* with contemporary Western philosophical trends, while at the same time possessing a deep knowledge of the Chinese tradition. He uses that tradition not as an ideal to be emulated but as a vantage point that allows us to look more critically at our own thinking.

Western aesthetic theory begins with the concept of beauty and sees it as the focal point for the whole enterprise of art-making. Chinese classical thought, on the contrary, does not have a single term for beauty and thinks about painting in a totally different way than we do. In fact, Jullien points out that the translations of Chinese writings about the arts into Western languages take the multiplicity of terms that describe qualities of painting in Chinese and translate them all into the univocal Western concept of the beautiful.

We might ask, is not beauty what we look for in art? Is that not the goal of all art-making? But before we answer that, the question arises, what do we mean by beauty? What theoretical baggage comes along with this concept? From a classical Chinese perspective, may beauty even be a “strange” idea? Jullien’s radical defamiliarizing of beauty by changing our perspective and looking at it as something questionable, allows us to ask about the ground of beauty. What are the preconceptions that make Western thought put beauty at the center of our thinking about art? What metaphysical standpoint gives rise to the concept of the beautiful, and what role does that concept play in upholding this metaphysics?

For Jullien, the idea of the beautiful arises out of the need for a mediation between the division of the sensible and the intelligible set forth in Plato’s work and maintained in the Western philosophical tradition. For Plato, everyday reality “comes into being and passes away.” It is constantly changing and therefore cannot be the basis for truth, for that which is always valid no matter what the circumstances. Plato’s favorite examples, of course, are the truths of mathematics, especially geometry. The properties of the circle are always the same, no matter when, where or by whom they are calculated. In fact, the circle cannot be found in our sensible world. It is a purely intelligible concept, without determinate size. In Plato’s thinking, the same is true for morality; the good is always the same, though particular instances of it may vary.

If, then, there is a gulf between what is revealed to us by the senses and what is grasped by the intellect, we need a mediator to bring them together. The beautiful fulfills this role, since at one and the same time it is shown to us in each beautiful thing and yet also is the idea by which we judge those things to be beautiful. Thus Western thought isolates and abstracts the beautiful and then uses it as the criterion to judge whether

anything in particular fits this criterion. The question then arises, to what extent does this particular thing resemble the beautiful itself?

Moreover, the beautiful shows itself as *form*, that which stands out before us in a clear and distinct way. Only that which has a harmonious form in which all the parts are coordinated can be thought to be beautiful. The lack of harmony in form, then, will result in the object being judged to be ugly. The model for Western aesthetics is the nude, the human body which is perfectly proportioned. The form of the naked body becomes the ideal for art. It resembles as far as possible the beautiful itself.

What then is the case in classical Chinese thinking about the arts? First of all, Jullien cautions us, we must not take contemporary writing about the arts in Chinese to be definitive. In fact, he says, Chinese thinkers have themselves adapted the Western idea of the beautiful and reinterpreted the art of the classical period in these terms.

Jullien, on the other hand, has gone back to the conversations about painting among Chinese literati during the classical period and found that there is no univocal concept of the beautiful. Rather, the qualities of painting are described in a variety of ways, many of which are in tension with one another. What holds these polarities together is the “yin and yang from which the engendering of the world follows” (p.33), as each member of the polarity yields to the other.

The archetypical instance of this opposition is not the nude but the landscape, the play of mountain and water in which the viewer can be absorbed. The landscape does not present itself to us as an object that we can capture by our gaze. Rather, the landscape absorbs us. It allows us to become lost in it, to wander from peak to vale without fixing our gaze upon a determinate object.

The landscape in classical Chinese painting takes us in, it allows us to linger endlessly without coming to a terminus. Above all, it is not an object from which we are separated and which we, as autonomous subjects, can grasp. The landscape does not reveal being to us, but rather is permeated by life (*chi*), a process full of significance which can never be exhausted.

Thus, in a way, we can say that there is no such thing as Chinese aesthetics, i.e., in the sense that aesthetics has come to mean for us the science, i.e., knowledge, of beauty. Rather, the conversations of the literati about landscape painting meander. They are opportunities for intimacy in being together, nothing more.

Moreover, Jullien points out, the recent development of painting in the West has itself deviated more and more from the ideal of the beautiful object. Rather, Western art now focuses on the construction of the work, the process which brings it into being. We become more interested in what the artist is doing than in what he or she has made. The goal even becomes that of a continuous process in which the work is never finished. Art itself, for us, has left the idea of the beautiful behind.

Nevertheless, Jullien points out, beauty does not die so easily. When we are confronted, to use his examples, with the Nude or with Venice, we can only stand back and say, “How beautiful!” The beautiful has become indispensable for us. Moreover, the thought of the beautiful is something that is available to all of us. In Kant’s philosophy, the culmination of aesthetic thought, the beautiful no longer signifies the universality of the concept. Rather, beauty is revealed to us through our common sense, it touches us in

our humanity. Thus the beautiful opens up the possibility of a public and leads us to the formation of a democratic space, something, Jullien thinks, that was not available in classical China.

Thus, after thoroughly deconstructing the beautiful, Jullien tells us that “we can no longer believe in it nor can we do without it” (p.248). Rather we need to “reflect upon what an adventurous idea it has been” (p. 251), to probe its preconceptions and to see what paths it still opens up for us. Standing within the tradition of Chinese landscape painting enables us to see the beautiful as “strange,” not in order to Orientalize ourselves, an impossible task in any case, even (especially?) for the Chinese, but in order to open up new possibilities not only for the arts but for our culture as a whole. Above all, Chinese thinking about landscape painting tells us that there is another way than that of Being (as Emmanuel Levinas entitled one of his books on the encounter with the Other, *Otherwise than Being*.)

What then happens when we look at the use of the arts in therapy? Perhaps we find many things we already knew but did not know how to account for. The work of our clients does not aim at beauty in the classical sense but at life. It is often chaotic and unfinished. It does not distance itself from us, but rather draws us in and affects us emotionally. Above all, it is in process—the experience of making it opens us up to a creative way of living, not to a finished state of being, as Shaun McNiff never ceases reminding us (McNiff, 1998).

Moreover, the arts in therapy are relational— they happen between the therapist and the client. Often they are the product of the joint work of the two, but in any case they can only be understood as happening in the “intermediate space” of which D. W. Winnicott speaks. We require a “relational aesthetic,” to use the phrase of Catherine Moon (2001), in order to understand therapeutic art.

What then of beauty? Is it of no use to us in understanding the arts in therapy? I think it is, as beauty can still be employed in discussing contemporary arts therapy. In recent years, Paolo Knill and his colleagues at the European Graduate School have distinguished three kinds of “decentering,” ways of moving into the alternative world of the imagination: play-oriented, work-oriented and ritual-oriented decentering. Certainly, in play, there is no end product aimed at but a continuous back and forth which delights in its own process. ((cf. P. Knill, 2004)

Nevertheless, we must remember that the tradition of the arts on which we stand leads to the making of a work – the painter wants the image, the poet wants the poem. They are not satisfied with the making alone but aim for the thing made. Art may begin in play, in improvisation and exploration, but it is necessary, in the term used by H.G. Gadamer, for play to transform into a *structure* for a work to emerge that can be identified and repeated, albeit differently each time (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2004). Even in the therapeutic process, it is possible for a playful exploration in sound or movement, for example, to be repeated and shaped into a song or a dance that evokes what we call an “aesthetic response” for the client, not a disinterested and detached judgment of beauty but a felt sense that “takes the breath away” and “touches” us. We even say that it is the “aesthetic responsibility” of the therapist to help the client find their aesthetic response (Knill, P., 2004)

In this sense, beauty still has a place, but it is a different kind of beauty, not the disinterested judgment of resemblance to the Idea but the felt sense of a living presence that matters to the artist and the viewer. Perhaps we can say it is a “living beauty,” one that through its disparateness and chaos carries the energy of life. It is a beauty that is unfinished, that carries on in the work and in the life. It is neither the isolated and abstract beauty of the West (i.e., Europe) nor the meditative process of the East (i.e., China), but something still arriving, in the way that Derrida speaks of the “democracy-to-come.”

It is not surprising that Jullien is able to undertake his philosophical critique of beauty as the linchpin of Western Metaphysics, since all of post-modern thinking is based on a critique of the subject-object opposition that underlies that duality. Not only deconstructionism but also other trends in philosophy and psychology have the same basis. What Jullien’s informed comparative perspective does, though, is to give us an “outside” that enables us to see the “inside” more clearly. Suddenly our own perspective looks “strange” and motivates us to go beyond it to a new point of view.

What that point of view will be is not yet clear. Perhaps it will never become clear, as clarity is only a virtue for a standpoint that is not involved in what it sees. For us, on the other hand, as our work in the arts therapies shows us, there is an area of experience that is inchoate, maybe even muddled, but that is pregnant with meaning and with new possibilities to come. Perhaps it is our responsibility to open a space for what is coming, the “rough beast,” to use Yeat’s phrase, who this time may bring us joy rather than destruction.

This intermediate area of experience, in which there is no object opposed to us which we can survey, nor are we in the autonomous position of the subject who can master it, depends on our willingness to give up knowledge and control. Here perhaps is where we can learn from the Chinese masters, particularly in the Taoist tradition. If we can follow what is emerging, instead of dominating it and forcing it to go our way, then something new may emerge which we had not envisaged beforehand. This is indeed the way of the artist, as well as that of the sage.

“Giving up control in order to achieve mastery,” as Paolo Knill often says, is to follow the path of *wu-wei*, “non-action,” in the sense not of doing nothing but rather of letting our own acts follow what is happening, joining it and helping it to find its own way. This may be the only attitude which can lead us to the “living beauty” that goes beyond the opposition of East and West.

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