

Saving beauty



BYUNG-CHUL
HAN

'IN THIS PROVOCATIVE ANALYSIS Han agitates against contemporary notions of smooth, airbrushed beauty. Instead he pleads for an aesthetic based on a generative, creative commitment to truth that can encompass negativity, injury and disaster. Ranging from pornography to classical literature, this tour de force of thinking about our understanding of beauty reminds us that philosophy can have teeth. Han writes with a compelling urgency about how we live in the here and now, but also how we could live better. *Saving Beauty* is an aesthetic call to arms; an example of how philosophy can militate for a better world and make us see anew.'

Karen Leeder, Oxford University

BEAUTY TODAY IS A PARADOX. The cult of beauty is ubiquitous but it has lost its transcendence and become little more than an aspect of consumerism, the aesthetic dimension of capitalism. The sublime and unsettling aspects of beauty have given way to corporeal pleasures and 'likes', resulting in a kind of 'pornography' of beauty.

In this book, cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han reinvigorates aesthetic theory for our digital age. He interrogates our preoccupation with all things slick and smooth, from Jeff Koon's sculptures and the iPhone to Brazilian waxing. Reaching far deeper than our superficial reactions to viral videos and memes, Han wants to reclaim beauty by showing how it is associated with truth, temptation and even disaster.

This wide-ranging and profound exploration of beauty will appeal to anyone interested in cultural and aesthetic theory, philosophy and digital media.

BYUNG-CHUL HAN is a Korean-born Professor of Philosophy and Cultural Studies who teaches at the University of the Arts (UdK) in Berlin. He is the author of more than twenty books, including *The Scent of Time*, *The Transparency Society* and *The Burnout Society*.

Cover design by Ana Boavida / www.fba.pt

Photos by Jon Flobrant and Mitchell Bryson / unsplash.com

Printed in Great Britain

polity

politybooks.com



9 781509 515097 >

Saving beauty

BYUNG-CHUL HAN
polity

Byung-Chul Han

Saving Beauty

Translated by Daniel Steuer

polity

First published in German as *Die Errettung des Schönen* © S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 2015

This English edition © Polity Press, 2018

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing, Suite 300,
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Extracts on pages vi and 77 from *Paul Celan: Selected Poems*,
Author: Paul Celan, translated by: Michael Hamburger,
© 1972. Reproduced with the kind permission of Johnson & Alcock Ltd.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1509-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1510-3 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Han, Byung-Chul, author.
Title: Saving beauty / Byung-Chul Han.
Description: English edition. | Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA:
Polity Press, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017009266 (print) | LCCN 2017030526 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781509515127 (Mobi) | ISBN 9781509515134 (Epub) |
ISBN 9781509515097 | ISBN 9781509515103 (pb)
Subjects: LCSH: Aesthetics.
Classification: LCC BH39 (ebook) | LCC BH39 .H36 2017 (print) |
DDC 111/.85--dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017009266>

Typeset in 11.5 on 15 pt Janson Text by
Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website:
politybooks.com

Saving Beauty

Once,
I heard him,
he was washing the world
unseen, nightlong,
real.

One and Infinite,
annihilated
ied.

Light was. Salvation.

Paul Celan¹

CONTENTS

1. The Smooth	1
2. The Smooth Body	11
3. The Aesthetics of the Smooth	15
4. Digital Beauty	23
5. The Aesthetics of Veiling	27
6. The Aesthetics of Injury	33
7. The Aesthetics of Disaster	40
8. The Ideal of Beauty	46
9. Beauty as Truth	51
10. The Politics of Beauty	58
11. Pornographic Theatre	63
12. Lingering on Beauty	67
13. Beauty as Reminiscence	72
14. Giving Birth in Beauty	77
Notes	82

The Smooth

The smooth is the signature of the present time. It connects the sculptures of Jeff Koons, iPhones and Brazilian waxing. Why do we today find what is smooth beautiful? Beyond its aesthetic effect, it reflects a general social imperative. It embodies today's *society of positivity*. What is smooth does not *injure*. Nor does it offer any resistance. It is looking for *Like*. The smooth object deletes its *Against*. Any form of negativity is removed.

The aesthetics of the smooth is also adopted by smartphones. The LG G *Flex* is even covered with a self-healing skin which makes any scratch, that is, any trace of an injury, disappear within the shortest of times. It is invulnerable, so to speak. The artificial skin of this smartphone keeps it smooth at all times. It is also flexible and bendable, with a slight curvature so as to perfectly follow the contours of the face and back pocket. This

adaptability and absence of resistance are essential characteristics of the aesthetics of the smooth.

Smoothness is not limited to the outside of the digital apparatus. Communication via a digital apparatus also appears smoothed out, as it is mostly polite remarks, even positivities, which are exchanged. 'Sharing' and 'Like' represent communicative means for smoothening. Negativities are eliminated because they represent obstacles to accelerated communication.

Jeff Koons, arguably the most successful living artist at present, is a master of smooth surfaces. Andy Warhol also professed his commitment to beautiful, smooth surfaces, but his art still had the negativity of death and disaster inscribed into it. His surfaces are not entirely smooth. The series *Death and Disaster*, for instance, still lives off negativity. In Jeff Koons's work, by contrast, there exists no disaster, no injury, no ruptures, also no seams. Everything flows in soft and smooth transitions. Everything appears rounded, polished, smoothed out. Jeff Koons's art is dedicated to smooth surfaces and their immediate effect. It does not ask to be interpreted, to be deciphered or to be reflected upon. It is an art in the age of *Like*.

Jeff Koons says that an observer of his works should only emit a simple 'Wow'. It seems that his art does not require any judgement, interpretation or hermeneutics, no reflection or thought. It intentionally remains infantile, banal, imperturbably relaxed, disarming and disburdening. It has been emptied of any depth, any shallows, any profound sense. Thus, his motto is: 'to take the observer into your arms'. Nothing is meant to shake, injure or shock the observer. Art, according to Jeff Koons, is nothing but 'beauty', 'joy' and 'communication'.

His smooth sculptures cause a ‘haptic compulsion’ to touch them, even the desire to suck them. His art lacks a negativity that would demand distance. It is the positivity of smoothness alone that causes the haptic compulsion. It invites the observer to take an attitude without distance, to *touch*. An *aesthetic* judgement, however, presupposes a *contemplative distance*. The art of the smooth abolishes such distance.

Haptic compulsion and the desire to suck can only arise in an art of the smooth that is devoid of meaning. Hegel, who emphatically held on to the arts being meaningful, therefore limited the sensual in the arts to ‘the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing’.¹ They alone have access to meaning, while smell and taste are excluded from the enjoyment of art. The latter are only susceptible to the ‘agreeable’ which is not ‘the beauty of art’:² ‘For smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities – smell with material volatility in air, taste with the material liquefaction of objects, touch with warmth, cold, smoothness, etc.’³ The smooth only conveys an agreeable feeling, which cannot be connected with any meaning or profound sense. It exhausts itself in a ‘Wow’.

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes points out the haptic compulsion which is triggered by the new Citroën D.S.:

It is well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling: Christ’s robe was seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal. The D.S. 19 has no pretensions about being as smooth as cake-icing, although its

general shape is very rounded; yet it is the dove-tailing of its sections which interest the public most: one keenly fingers the edges of the windows, one feels along the wide rubber grooves which link the back window to its metal surround. There are in the *D.S.* the beginnings of a new phenomenology of assembling, as if one progressed from a world where elements are welded to a world where they are juxtaposed and hold together by sole virtue of their wondrous shape, which of course is meant to prepare one for the idea of a more benign Nature.

As for the material itself, it is certain that it promotes a taste for lightness in its magical sense. . . . Here, the glass surfaces are not windows, openings pierced in a dark shell; they are vast walls of air and space, with the curvature, the spread and the brilliance of soap bubbles, . . .⁴

Jeff Koons's seamless sculptures also look like brilliant, weightless soap bubbles made of air and emptiness. Like the seamless *D.S.*, they confer a feeling of perfection, of lightness in a magical sense. They embody a perfect and optimized surface without depth and shallows.

For Roland Barthes, the sense of touch 'is the most demystifying of all senses, unlike sight which is the most magical'.⁵ The sense of sight keeps a distance, while the sense of touch destroys it. Without distance, there can be no mysticism. De-mystification lets everything become available for enjoyment and consumption. The sense of touch destroys the negativity of what is wholly other. It secularizes what it touches. In contrast to the sense of sight, touch is incapable of wonderment. The smooth

touchscreen, therefore, is a place of de-mystification and total consumption. It produces what one *likes*.

Jeff Koons's sculptures are as *smooth as a mirror*, so to speak, allowing the observer to see him- or herself mirrored in them. On the occasion of the exhibition at the Beyeler Foundation, he remarked on his *Balloon Dog*:

The Balloon Dog is really a wonderful object. It wants to confirm the observer in their existence. I often work with reflecting, mirroring materials because they automatically raise the self-confidence of the viewer. Of course, in a dark room that doesn't work. But if you stand right in front of the object, you are reflected in it and assured of yourself.⁶

The Balloon Dog is not a Trojan horse, it does not *hide* anything. There is no *inwardness* hidden behind its smooth surface.

As in the case of the smartphone, you only encounter yourself, and not the *other*, when faced with the highly polished sculptures. The motto of Koons's art: 'The core is always the same: learn to trust yourself and your own history. That is also what I want to convey to the observer of my work. The observer is meant to feel their own love of life.'⁷ Art opens up an echo chamber, in which I assure myself of my own existence. The *alterity* or *negativity* of the *other* and the *alien* is eliminated altogether.

Jeff Koons's art possesses a *soteriological* dimension. It promises *salvation*. The world of smoothness is a culinary world, a world of pure positivity, in which there is no pain, no injury and no guilt. The *Balloon Venus* sculpture, shaped in birth position, is Jeff Koons's Holy

Mary. Yet, she does not give birth to a saviour, a *homo doloris* with a crown of thorns whose body is covered by wounds, but to champagne, a bottle of Dom Pérignon Rosé Vintage 2003, which is inside her belly. Jeff Koons presents himself as a Baptist promising salvation. It is no coincidence that there is a sequence of images from 1987 titled *Baptism*. Jeff Koons's art practises a *sacralization of the smooth*. He stages a *religion of the smooth, the banal*, even a *religion of consumption*. In their service, all negativity is to be eliminated.

For Gadamer, negativity is essential to art. It is its *wound*. It is opposed to the positivity of the smooth. There is *something* there which shakes me, an inner turmoil, which questions me and appeals to me: *You must change your life*:

It is the fact that a particular thing such as this exists that constitutes the 'additional something'. As Rilke says 'Such a thing stood among men.' This fact that it exists, its facticity, represents an unsurmountable resistance against any superior presumption that we can make sense of it all. The work of art compels us to recognize this fact. 'There is no place that fails to see you. You must change your life.'⁸

A push comes from the work of art. It pushes the observer down. The smooth has an altogether different intentional nature. It adapts to the observer, elicits a *Like* from him or her. All it wants is to please, and not to knock over.

Today, the beautiful itself is smoothened out by taking any negativity, any form of shock or injury, out of it. The beautiful is exhausted in a *Like-it*. Aestheticization turns

out to be anaestheticization; it sedates our perception.⁹ Thus, Jeff Koons's 'wow' is also an anaesthetic reaction that is diametrically opposed to the negative experience of shock, of being knocked over. Today, the *experience* of beauty is impossible. Where the wish to please, the *Like*, edges its way into the foreground, *experience*, which is impossible without negativity, withers.

Smooth visual communication takes place in the form of *contagion*, without any aesthetic distance. The unbroken visibility of the object at the same time destroys the gaze. Only the rhythmic oscillation between presence and absence, veiling and unveiling, keeps the gaze awake. The erotic also depends on 'the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance',¹⁰ on the 'undulations of the imaginary'.¹¹ The pornographic uninterrupted presence of the visible destroys the imaginary. Paradoxically, it presents *nothing to see*.

Today, not only the beautiful but also the ugly becomes smooth. The ugly also loses the negativity of the diabolical, of the uncanny and terrifying, and is smoothened out, a formula for consumption and enjoyment. It lacks entirely the fear- and terror-inducing gaze of the Medusa which petrifies everything. The ugly that was used by the artists and poets of the *fin de siècle* possessed something abysmal and demonic. The surrealist politics of the ugly served the purpose of provocation and emancipation; it marked a radical break from inherited patterns of perception.

Bataille saw in the ugly possibilities for overcoming boundaries and for liberation. For him, it offers access to transcendence:

No-one doubts the ugliness of the sexual act. Just as death does in sacrifice, the ugliness of the sexual union makes for anguish. But the greater the anguish . . . the stronger the realisation of exceeding the bounds and the greater the accompanying rush of joy.¹²

The essence of sexuality, according to this, is excess and transgression. It delimits consciousness. This is what constitutes its negativity.

Today, the entertainment industry exploits the ugly and disgusting, making it consumable. Disgust is originally a 'state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness, a convulsive struggle, in which what is in question is, quite literally, whether "to be or not to be"'.¹³ The disgusting is the non-consumable *par excellence*. The disgusting has an existential dimension also for Rosenkranz. It is the other of life, the other of form, *putrefaction*. A corpse is a scandalous phenomenon because it still has a form, although it is *in itself formless*. Due to the still existing form, it retains the semblance of life, despite being dead: 'the negation of the beautiful form of an appearance through a non-form originating in physical or moral decay. . . . The appearance of life in what is dead in itself is what is infinitely repulsive in disgust.'¹⁴ The disgusting as the infinitely repulsive evades any form of consumption. The disgusting which is today presented in the 'Dschungelcamp',¹⁵ lacks any negativity that might trigger an existential crisis. It is smoothened out into a form for consumption.

Brazilian waxing makes the body *smooth*. It represents today's compulsive hygiene. The essence of eroticism, for