

Languages and Beauty: from Umwelt Theory to Aesthetics

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Abstract: Recently, I suggested that we live in at least two *Umwelten* or subjective environments. One is the perceptual Umwelt of our species, which varies based on our development and background. The other is the Umwelt created by the language spoken by our community; it is intersubjective but allows for individual associations of meaning. Now, I will try to draw a few conclusions about beauty. Specifically, I will evaluate Jullien's deconstruction of beauty. Jullien's core assumption is that languages partly shape how and whether we think about beauty. Additionally, I will discuss Diego Poli's linguistic history of beauty as splendor and light in the West. Ultimately, I will focus on the contrast with Western aesthetic tradition in Giacomo Leopardi's poem *La ginestra* to support the idea that the linguistic Umwelt enables deeply personal meaning associations, while also suggesting that non-verbal artists might have more freedom than verbal ones.

Keywords: Beauty; Historical Linguistics; Jullien; Leopardi; Umwelt

1. Introduction

In this article, I attempt to outline a unified framework for my research on personal codes and Umwelt theory, as well as my recent teaching activities¹. In the innovative field of biological research known as Code Biology, it has been suggested that humans inhabit two separate worlds, each originating from vastly different developmental environments². In the uterine environment, we begin our familiarization with the world of names. After birth, we encounter the world of objects for the first time. As has been understood since Aristotle's time, the world of names is not shared by all humans but only within a particular community. Language development occurs alongside the growth of our understanding of the world of objects and helps shape it. When viewed as an Umwelt (inner environment), the world of objects isn't the same for everyone, as perception varies from childhood to adulthood (we tend to remember objects and places of our childhood as larger than they really were); our training background influences how we perceive things (*wu*, 物). For instance, the same woods appear different to a tourist, a child, and a forester. However, the perceptual Umwelt (world of objects) has features shared by all humans, such as the Kantian forms of space and time.

According to Jakob von Uexküll, artists are uniquely gifted at building or reproducing schemes within the bounds of human forms of experience: "Only the drawing artist is gifted at letting the melodies of directional signs come alive in his representation to control the impulse demand of the drawing hand through the directional signs of the eye, up to the point that the melody of its directional signs has become established for the hand too and guides the impulse sequence with certainty"³ (my trans.). On the other hand, poets and writers (verbal artists) create in a more limited inner environment, namely the linguistic Umwelt or world of names of the speaking community they write for. Are these two worlds separated? Or do we live an amphibious life? Neither the perceptual world nor the linguistic worlds (they are as many as the linguistic systems or Saussurean *langues*) are totally individual or wholly social. As said, the perceptual world is individual but marked by features shared by the whole species. Concerning linguistic *Umwelten*, they are social but allow for personal meaning associations (I'll give examples in section 4). The result of this dialectic is the personal Umwelt, thus defined: "I suggest that we call personal Umwelten the individual human perceptual Umwelten as affected by the linguistic Umwelten. The affection occurs through translation and results in an exchange of models between persons and their relevant communities"⁴. In the definition, "translation" is understood in an extended sense since it occurs between personal experience and communal language rather than just among languages.

In the personal Umwelt, we can find personal codes or sets of meaning associations ruled by shared norms and individual norms. This phenomenon is shared alike by non-verbal and verbal artists. Having a personal style in literature involves following at least some of the common linguistic rules and a few idiosyncratic linguistic rules. Similarly, a personal style in painting borrows at least some elements from

renowned models or an artistic canon with an eccentric twist; the invention of new rules or schemes produces the twist. Given that perception and language meet in the personal *Umwelt*, I suggest that the language we speak inclines us towards a certain idea of beauty without a deterministic force. I will not do this alone, but I will climb on the shoulders of François Jullien and Diego Poli. Still, I will also focus on Giacomo Leopardi's poem *La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto* to show a poet struggling with the Western traditional view of Beauty as Splendor.

2. The Beauty and Jullien

Jullien is both a sinologist and a philosopher; he would be internationally renowned as an integral part of French theory, were he not considered just a sinologist in the English-speaking world⁵. From him, China is a place and a conceptual expedient for uncovering what European thought and, in particular, philosophy took for granted without reflexively thinking about it. As a *locus* linguistically unrelated and culturally indifferent to Europe for millennia up to the Opium Wars, China is the best place for a deconstruction from the outside – a more radical way of deconstructing than Derrida's: with its astonishing *corpus* of written culture and long-period culturally hegemonic role in the Far East, China is another Europe or, better, another path for humanity than Europe. Jullien wants to avoid both relativism and universalism as well as exoticism and ethnocentrism. Rather, he wants to explore an alternative for understanding the path of his tradition. He left for China and returned to Europe, thinking philosophy anew thanks to this material and spiritual journey.

In his study of Beauty, Jullien starts the first chapter thus: “Let us therefore begin from closer up, at the level of language, the resources of language that predispose thought”.⁶ A measure of the linguistic distance between Indo-European languages and Chinese is the absence of morphological phrases in the latter: “[...] does (classical) Chinese language allow phrase ‘construal’? I’d rather say that [...] it aims at putting into a ‘formula’ or what I shall define, elaborating on the term, *formulation*. [...] The formula condenses a solution in a typical way, like a procedure, and, once adopted, one must learn it by heart and reuse it – the formula is *useful* and anti-speculative. It doesn’t take risks. A formula is viable, or valid, rather than true; its criterion is functional”⁷ (my trans.). This idea of Chinese formulae, rather than sentences of Western grammar, goes back to Marcel Granet’s study of Chinese thought⁸. Yet, Chinese formulae are not morpho-logically inarticulate thoughts; rather, they are, as suggested by the mathematical allusion of the term, thoughts articulated otherwise than through Indo-European syntax.

The article is the part of speech responsible for the European (Greek) idea of beauty: “The beautiful is thus not a ‘beautiful virgin’ (a beautiful mare, a beautiful lyre, a beautiful pot ...) but is ‘in-itself’ (*auto*), adding to all these various things. From what ‘is beautiful’ to ‘the beautiful’ – (European) philosophy was born from this added article and is promoted in this displacement”⁹. It is true that Jullien also makes a lexical observation: the word *mei* (美) only recently became the main expression for “beauty” and “beautiful”, before Chinese had a whole semantic field to express the experience of beauty without conceptualizing it under a main theoretical term. Still, even contemporary philosophical Chinese cannot exactly say “the beautiful” (the 美) and does not incline speakers to think of beauty as a metaphysical entity. On the contrary, Western traditional aesthetics is based on metaphysics because of the divide between Being (essence) and Becoming (accidents), thus needing beauty as a mediation between Eternity and Time¹⁰. The long-term process goes from the linguistic resources of Plato’s Greek to the pictorial genre of the nude, passing through the mediatory role of Beauty in Western dualistic thought. The nude, as a peculiarity of Western painting, is the pictorial consequence of linguistic and cultural choices: “If the Nude is the support of the beautiful, or if the beautiful is promoted from it, it is therefore because it best assures the function of *mediation* which falls to the latter, as we notice once again: arising at the heart of the visible and even rendering as visible as possible (*ekphanestaton*) the interpenetration of the sensible and the intelligible, which are otherwise considered as dramatically separated – and even when it comes to what matters most, or most vitally, to humanity, in other words, itself. The Nude is the great reconciler of a torn humanity – this, I believe, is what constitutes its true function. Indeed, the Nude will incarnate beauty all the better for succeeding in conjugating within itself the two rival options that the Greeks have developed from it: that of the beautiful through the triumph of unitary and modelling Form (Plato to Plotinus), and that of the beautiful resulting from the proportion and agreement of all of the parts (in the Stoic tradition). What is the Nude, in truth, if not the motion of synthesis that can be proposed of the beautiful?”¹¹.

Chinese landscape painting, based on the fusion of the material and the spiritual rather than on their separation and mediation, must be devoid of form or formless. Indeed, Jullien insists on the divergence between Greek *eidos* (form) and Chinese *xíng* (形)¹². Despite the semantic distance, another concept is available to speak of form in Chinese art. It is a semiotic, rather than metaphysical, one and was employed by Li Zehou: “Some of the geometric patterns of Yangshao and Majiayao clearly evolved from realistic animal images into abstract symbols. The direction of development, in form and content, was from simple imitation to stylized abstraction, from realism to symbolism. This was the primary process in the development of the concept of beauty as ‘significant form.’”¹³ For sure, it is something closer to Ernst Cassirer’s functionalist symbolic form than to Greek substantialist metaphysics. Even if Li opens a path to beauty in China, he also corroborates Jullien’s claim that linguistic resources gently guide painters’ brushes, at least when it comes to Song landscape painting expressing written lines from poems. Indeed, Li writes about the Imperial Painting Academy (*Hanlin Huayuan*, 翰林畫院): “Painters were

required to express the idea of a poem in their paintings. But because Chinese poetry is often very vague, with much meaning implied beyond the written word, master painters had to ponder and create ways to express these meanings. Thus poetic flavour became an important, consciously sought-after goal in Chinese landscape painting”¹⁴.

3. A Linguistic History of Beauty

Li’s reading of paleolithic Chinese art shares an aspect with Diego Poli’s historical-linguistic book on Beauty. Their historical journeys on beauty both start with the human meaning of colors. Li writes: “Upper cave men dyed their clothes with red iron ore and scattered red powder beside their dead because that particular colour, red, produced more than just a stimulating effect on the physiological experience of humans, an effect that could also be produced on animals. It possessed or provided a certain conceptual quality which animals could never perceive or share. Primitive humans used and wore red not out of an animal-like physiological reaction to it, but because the actions associated with its use had taken on a socially shared symbolic significance. In other words, human imagination had invested the colour with a unique symbolic, conceptual quality; consequently, what red produced in humans of that period was not just sensory pleasure but an imaginative and conceptual response”¹⁵. Without references to Li and most likely unintentionally, Poli expresses in the jargon of neuroaesthetics and semiology a very similar claim¹⁶: when color is neurotransmitted from the right hemisphere, where beauty sensation is processed (Li’s sensory pleasure), to the left part of the brain, where verbal creation takes place, the color is subject to arbitrary and conventional codification (Li’s imaginative and conceptual response), depending on the lexical resources of a specific culture to the extent that to think about beauty a specific lexicon is needed. Therefore, the meaning and relevance of a color can change across cultural history: “Until the Middle Ages, the symbolic dimension of the blue remained that of a secondary color in the West before getting to be considered the color of eternity with Kandinsky”¹⁷ (my trans.). In the Indo-European linguistic family, the colors of beauty are red – its association with beauty is well preserved in the Slavic branch – and, when luminosity is associated with goodness, white. Thus, there is a partial coincidence in the long-period Chinese and Western chromatic symbolisms. Considering the role of white or blank spaces in Chinese and Japanese painting, one might think of a full expressive coincidence, but Poli is very clear about the following point: the Eastern path of beauty connects whiteness to vacuity, while the Western path associates luminosity (a shared feature of red and white) with beauty and goodness¹⁸. Then, Indo-European beauty expresses itself in luminosity rather than in one or two colors; for instance, the beauty or vivid splendor of creation was signified by greenness (*viriditas*) in Hildegard of Bingen, who saw its roots in the sun¹⁹.

Poli does not limit himself to showing the semantic distance between East and West. Since his book spans from the Greek and Latin origins of Western aesthetics of light to Twentieth-century Italian poetry and the contemporary challenges faced by Italian literary tradition due to rising difficulties in transmitting it to the younger generations, Poli provides scientific evidence for Jullien’s claims about the linguistic origins of the metaphysical background of Western aesthetic tradition. In the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia* (beauty and goodness in just one composite word), “the relation between the two terms is grounded by etymological derivation from the common base even before depending on Greek culture”²⁰ (my trans.). Indeed, Poli documents this conclusion by reference to the relationship between *bonus* (good) and *bellus* (beautiful) in the history of Latin (a close linguistic relative of ancient Greek), tracking it back to the same Indo-European lexical root *dwe-*²¹. Another corroboration of Jullien’s claims comes from the Late Ancient and Medieval Latin tradition (mostly St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas): “The form attains splendor (*splendor formae*) because it receives light (*claritas*) from sight and harmony (*consonantia*) through hearing”²² (my trans.). Like in Jullien, beauty is form and harmony, but Poli adds a stress on luminosity or splendor that is lacking in Jullien’s account, particularly when the latter speaks of Plato and Plotinus.

Poli identifies a fully-fledged exemplification of the aesthetics of luminosity in Dante’s poetry, outstandingly in the *Commedia*: “Across all of Dante’s Poem, the beauty~light relation is implanted on the beauty~light~word relation”²³ (my. trans.). Light is silent in Hell, while words are shiny and lights speak in Heaven²⁴. Here, the previous reference to *consonantia* (harmony as sounding or chanting together) becomes clear. In this view, akin to what Jullien called the Stoic tradition in the long quotation on the nude I reported in section 2, beauty is the pleasure aroused by a balanced responsiveness among parts (co-sounding or re-sounding), thus resulting in harmony²⁵. The beauty of creation, its harmony, is epitomized by Beatrice, whose beauty as a reflection of Holy Mary elevates Dante’s gaze to the source of beauty (the eternal light of God)²⁶. Interestingly, the main colors of beauty I mentioned so far, namely red, green, and white, are present together in Dante’s allegorical description of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity²⁷. Indeed, the final words of the *Commedia* on God’s love moving the sun and the other stars are a Christian translation of Socrates’s remark in Plato’s *Philebus* (64e) on the goodness seeking refuge in beauty.

4. Leopardi’s flower of the desert

The Italian Marxist philosopher and critic Galvano della Volpe remarked on poets’ meaning-making thus: “innumerable other ‘roses’ are produced from and above the ‘rose’ of dictionaries (literal-material): the Dantean *candida rosa* of the *milizia santa* as much as, say, Burns’ *red, red rose*”²⁸ (my trans.). Indeed, Leopardi in his poem turns a plant into a model of wisdom for future humanity, giving a new

meaning to the Italian word *ginestra*: “And you, gentle broom, / who adorn this despoiled countryside / with fragrant thickets, / you too will soon succumb to the cruel power / of the subterranean fire, / which returns to the place / it already knows, to stretch over your soft copses / its voracious tongue. And you’ll bow / beneath its mortal flow without a struggle / your innocent head: / but a head not bent in vain / cowardly begging before / a future oppressor; nor raised / with insane pride to the stars, / nor above the desert, / where your home and birthplace were / not through choice but chance: / far wiser and much less / fallible than man, since you never believed / that your frail species / could, by fate or yourself, become immortal”²⁹. The plant on Mount Vesuvius is wiser than humans of the past and of Leopardi’s present in that it avoids the delusions of fatalism and voluntarism. Leopardi was struggling with both the rising materialism of his time and traditional Greek-rooted spiritualism. The beauty of the wild broom lies in the fragrance of its flowers rather than in their solar color (its flowers are yellow). Even though Plotinus used odorous substances as a metaphor of the process of metaphysical emanation from the One and such substances played a role in Florentine Platonist rituals during the Renaissance³⁰, Leopardi focuses the reader’s attention on the smell rather than on the color to avoid the long-lasting and much more deep-rooted association of yellow with the sun and thus with the metaphorical reference to Plato’s Goodness³¹. From this example, I understand that poets do not easily escape their language and culture. Yet, they can play with their semiotic chains. For instance, Leopardi successfully shifted from vision to olfaction and, despite not getting far from Neoplatonic imagery, he managed to detach his personal code from the aesthetics of luminosity identified by Poli.

How is it possible for a person to constitute a cultural minority in a wider cultural environment? My answer is Platonic: the human person is capable of self-dialogue as much as dialogue with others (*Philebus*, 38c-38e); culture-making is a dialogue; therefore, each of us can create a personal culture beyond contributing to the culture shared with others. Still, I sense an affinity between my answer and Tu Weiming’s Confucian conception of the person as a “center of relationships”³² and of linguistic and cultural vincula as “enabling constraints”³³. Based on Leopardi’s example, I think that, given that poets are more directly limited by their linguistic *Umwelten*, each non-verbal artist should show a wider freedom in personally building an individual cultural minority based not only on speaking or writing an idiolect but also on the idiosyncratic experience of the variety of things. Elsewhere, I connected Titian’s creation of a pictorial personal code in his mythological painting for Philip II of Spain to the affirmation of Titian’s workshop in the art market of that time³⁴. As suggested by a Chinese painter-thinker like Shitao 石濤, a painter should be able to create a new school in reaching the completion of personal cultivation³⁵.

5. Conclusion

I conclude by highlighting the Chinese aesthetic tradition as an important area for further exploration that might challenge the distinction I made in section 1 between verbal and non-verbal artists. That distinction is grounded in scientific evidence of a neural separation between processing sound and other sensory information³⁶. However, I used poets and writers to describe verbal artists: in alphabetic cultures, writing is typically a separate activity from drawing and painting. This separation makes less sense in non-alphabetic cultures. For example, Chinese and Japanese writing are, in different ways, more closely connected to drawing and painting. Certainly, Chinese and Japanese speakers operate between the perceptual and linguistic *Umwelt*. Still, their personal *Umwelt* might translate verbal into non-verbal and vice versa more seamlessly than in the personal *Umwelt* of an Indo-European language speaker. Even more interestingly, Li links Chinese calligraphy with music and dance through the concept of the art of the line³⁷. This suggests that my distinction between linguistic and pictorial personal codes would be characterized by a much more organic or holistic integration of the verbal with the perceptual (non-verbal) outside the Western aesthetic tradition, raising questions about how to think interculturally regarding musical and gestural personal codes.

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