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MYTH OF BEAUTY – THE GREAT THEORY

MIT PIĘKNA – WIELKA TEORIA

Abstract

Each epoch, each nation, each civilization has its own characteristic systems of myths that determine their unity, identity and durability. Since the dawn of time, people have been convinced that the world exists because of the order in which it was arranged and the laws that maintain this order. Rights, on the other hand, are subject to the highest values, the most important of which were good, truth and beauty. According to professor of philosophy Leszek Kołakowski, “the world of values is a mythical reality.”¹ Mythical consciousness “[...] is present in every understanding of the world as endowed with values.”² Due to the huge multitude of meanings of forms of beauty as a value in different cultural epochs, the paper deals only with the aspect of its common perception within the so-called *Great Theory*. The methods used to study this issue were mainly based on a literature review and multiple case studies.

Keywords: myth, beauty, The Great Theory of Beauty

Streszczenie

Każda epoka, każdy naród, każda cywilizacja ma swoje charakterystyczne układy mitów, które stanowią o ich jedności, tożsamości i trwałości. Od zarania dziejów w świadomości ludzi tkwiło przekonanie, że świat istnieje dzięki porządkowi, według którego został urządzony, oraz dzięki prawom, które ten porządek utrzymują. Prawa natomiast podlegają naczelnym wartościom, z których za najważniejsze uznane były dobro, prawda i piękno. Według profesora filozofii Leszka Kołakowskiego „świat wartości jest realnością mityczną.”³ Świadomość mityczna „[...] obecna jest natomiast w każdym rozumieniu świata jako wyposażonego w wartości.”⁴

Ze względu na ogromną wielość znaczeniową postaci piękna jako wartości w różnych epokach kulturowych, w referacie podjęto jedynie aspekt jego potocznego postrzegania w obrębie tzw. Wielkiej Teorii. Metody użyte w badaniach nad tym zagadnieniem opierały się głównie na przeglądzie literatury oraz wielokrotnym studium przypadku.

Słowa kluczowe: mit, piękno, Wielka Teoria Piękna

1. INTRODUCTION

Greek *mythos* means “word” or “speech” among other things. French writer, literary critic and semiology theorist Roland Barthes in *Le mythe aujour’hui* writes: “what is a myth? Let me give you the first, very simple answer that fits perfectly with the etymology: a myth

¹ L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2005, p. 33.

² *Ibidem*, p. 36.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

is a word.”⁵ For Paul Valéry, a *myth* is the name for everything that exists or lasts, insofar as the reason is the utterance.⁶

Marian Golka understands myth as

a form of consciousness characterized by a subjective sense of truth and falsehood. Hence it falls, as it were, outside the category of truth and falsehood. [...] The myth extends between what is knowable and what is difficult or even impossible to discover. Its value lies in the fact that it shows a single fact of absolute importance, as well as informs about a common problem by revealing a specific phenomenon. [...] A myth is a testimony to history, or rather a trace of it.⁷

Thus, it turns out, in the historical sense, the first cultural model.

The philosophical and anthropological orientation of myth defines it not only as a social phenomenon, but also as an expression of a specific attitude to the world, as a reflection of a specific structure of consciousness [...] myths are an expression of a characteristic, separate logic, which becomes the actual subject of study. [...] They denote forms of expression of a specific attitude towards reality or a specific way of seeing reality.⁸

The first attempts to describe reality in a complete and final way can be found in the mythological propositions.⁹ Individual mythological systems offer specifically designed and properly constructed versions of the ultimate theories. One can find there attempts to finally and comprehensively explain phenomena. One of the most monumental final concepts in the history of all Western culture seems to be the so-called Great Theory of Beauty. It has been the most important aesthetic theory for over twenty-two centuries.

2. OBJECTIVITY OF BEAUTY

The Great Theory received its name not only because of its scope, as it covers the entire field of beauty, but also because of its extremely long duration – it can be said to have prevailed since the 5th century B.C. until the 18th century AD. At that time, despite numerous modifications and additions, it was characterized by a compactness and multiplicity of aspects that exhausted the existing problems of beauty.

It is believed that the Greeks were the founders of the Great Theory. Initiated by the Pythagoreans – it was created as a result of the observation of the harmony of sounds – it assumes that the relations of the parts determining beauty can be expressed numerically. This is in line with their belief in the harmony of the world expressed in numbers, because the principle of being is a number that appears as something divine or as the essence of all things. Thus, the original thesis of the Great Theory was harmony and symmetry, and beauty

⁵ R. Barthes, *Le mythe aujourd'hui* [in:] R. Barthes, *Mit i znak*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1970, p. 25.

⁶ J. Niżnik, *Mit jako kategoria metodologiczna*, Kultura i Społeczeństwo, 1978, no. 22(3), p. 164.

⁷ M. Golka, *Atrakcyjność mitu*, https://www.nck.pl/upload/archiwum_kw_files/artykuly/2._marian_golka_atrakcyjnosc_mitu.pdf (access: 28.04.2021).

⁸ J. Niżnik, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁹ Z. Drozdowicz (ed.), *Mity. Historia i struktura mistyfikacji*, Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, Poznań 1997, p. 140.

consisted in the selection of proportions, that is, the right ratio of size, quality and quantity of parts. This discovery, made in the field of music, quickly spread to other areas of art, such as architecture and sculpture.

The consequence of such a theory was the search for perfect proportions for each of the arts. In the field of music and the visual arts, they were widely adopted, and although they arose independently of each other, they were based on an identical concept of beauty. This concept prevailed among artists, but also among Pythagorean philosophers who found the preservation of order and proportion to be beautiful and useful, which is achieved through numbers. The Stoics found the beauty of the human body in the interplay of individual members and in their relation to the whole. There is no doubt that this ancient doctrine of equating beauty with proportion was accepted by all antiquity (Plato, 5th century BC; Aristotle, 4th century BC; Stoics, 3rd century BC) being a great, universal and enduring theory.

The Great Theory was predicated along with some aesthetic theses about beauty. Most of the supporters of the Great Theory recognized the theses: about the rational cognition of beauty and its quantitative nature, while the metaphysical thesis was the most significant for the human approach to the issues of beauty.

Proponents of harmony in numbers and proportions saw the highest law of nature, and therefore the principle of being. In antiquity, the beauty of the natural world was the basic model for art – according to Cicero, the world “is perfect in all its proportions and parts.”¹⁰ Plato contrasted the beauty of the idea with sensual beauty, which was modeled on the ideal and perfect beauty, reflecting it. True beauty, according to his general philosophy, could only be reflected in eternal ideas, constituting extrasensory beauty.

The concept of ideal beauty, according to Plato, became the beginning of the theological version of the metaphysical thesis, popularized mainly by the Church Fathers in Christianity. In the Middle Ages, beauty became not so much a characteristic of God’s works, but an attribute of God himself – according to Clement of Alexandria, God was the cause of all that was beautiful. At the time of the greatest development of scholasticism, Ulrich of Strasbourg wrote: “God is not only perfectly beautiful and is the highest degree of beauty, but is also the efficient, exemplary and purposeful cause of all created beauty.”¹¹ The theological theses were characteristic of the medieval period of the Great Theory, but also appeared in the Restoration. Palladio argued that the shape of the circle is of particular importance to architecture because “it is best suited to visualizing the unity, infinity, uniformity and justice of God.”¹²

Aristotle and Plato assumed that beauty is objective – proportions and patterns are beautiful in themselves, not because they suit someone. According to the former, beauty is contained in multiplicity and order, for the latter it is in keeping measure and proportion. According to Plato, the creator of objective idealism, what is beautiful pleases the eyes not because of something else, but is always beautiful for oneself. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that “beauty is what in itself is worthy of choice.”¹³ St. Thomas, as a representative of the dualist theory that existed in the Middle Ages, remained faithful to the thesis of objectivism, recognizing the beauty of things not because we love them, but because we love them because they are beautiful. It was also common among adherents of the Great Theory

¹⁰ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1976, p. 148.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹² A. Palladio, *Cztery księgi o architekturze*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1955.

¹³ W. Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

that beauty was a good. Plato placed beauty next to the highest values, i.e. good and truth, finding the meaning of life in the possibility of seeing beauty.

In the early centuries of existence, the Great Theory was accepted by the majority without criticism and seemed self-evident. It was only in late antiquity that Vitruvius, in his work *De architectura*, set out detailed rules to be respected in this area. His treatise was based on the Greek tradition of architectural theory and the legacy of Roman building practice.

According to Vitruvius, an architectural work should meet the requirements of durability – *firmitas*, functionality – *utilitas* and beauty – *venustas*. On the other hand, the features that a creator-architect should have are: inborn talent – *natura*, knowledge – *doctrina*, and practical experience – *usus*. As an architect, Vitruvius promised to present the field of architecture and its rules clearly and accurately, not only for those who build, but also for all educated people. The principles described by Vitruvius, indicated mainly for the construction of temples or city buildings, were applied, as if unknowingly, almost automatically and reigned both in Antiquity and the Middle Ages:

Ordinatio – ordering, arranging individual parts of the work and proposing the proportions of the entire building, which results from the numerical ratio, and the quantitative ratio is a module based on its individual elements.

Dispositio – striving to obtain an exquisite work through the appropriate juxtaposition of building elements.

Eurytmia – is the graceful appearance of the building. It can be achieved through the proper juxtaposition of individual building elements, i.e. the appropriate height to width, width to length ratio and compliance with the rules of symmetry.

Decor – is appropriateness in the building, i.e. the impeccable appearance of the whole, composed of individual elements considered good.

Distributio – that is economy, recommends appropriate management of materials and space, as well as economy and moderation in planning construction expenses.

3. SUBJECTIVITY OF BEAUTY

The criticism of the Great Theory came at the end of antiquity but did not so much deny it as gave rise to a new, parallel dualistic theory of beauty.¹⁴ It was initiated by Plotinus, pointing to the fact that according to the Great Theory, only composite objects, having parts, could be beautiful. Thus, the theory does not exhaust beauty in its descriptions. He noticed that beauty does not only depend on proportion but is an expression of the psyche. Material things are beautiful when they are saturated with the spirit.

Doubts arose early among the sophists as to the objectivity of beauty, undermining the validity of the main thesis of the Great Theory.

Socrates did not agree that beauty is in proportion, but in appropriateness – the beauty of an object comes from its accord with purpose and nature. He formulated an important question about the practical sense of beauty and its relationship to utility and purposefulness, thus developing the sophists' thought of the relativity of beauty. Socrates, supported by the Stoics, did not completely deny the Theory, but limited it, claiming that there is a beauty of

¹⁴ This theory, being the work of antiquity, was not typical for him. Instead, it entered the Medieval Theory of Art.

proportion by itself and beautiful to something. As can be seen in Antiquity, when the theory of beauty as proportion was developed, many doubts arose which led to the emergence of alternative views on beauty. It was, among others the above-mentioned theory of suitability or the theory that divides beauty into ideal, sensual, spiritual or bodily.

The mediator between antiquity and the Middle Ages was Boethius, who proclaimed that beauty is the commensurability of parts and nothing more. This theory was supported by St. Augustine, whose views and formulations persisted in the Middle Ages for a thousand years. A Christian follower of Plotinus, an anonymous fifth-century writer called Pseudo-Dionysius, spread the idea that beauty is proportion and brilliance. This formula was adopted by the leading scholastics of the 13th century. In the 17th century, expression understood as clarity, i.e. the characteristic appearance of things and people, gained a career. However, it should be remembered that in the 18th century, beauty was understood as an expression of feelings, while the general theory of beauty as expression did not appear until the 20th century.

In the Renaissance, philosophers dealt with nature rather than aesthetics, without thinking about beauty. However, in the 15th century, artists and poets deliberated on beauty. They referred to antiquity, citing Aristotle or Vitruvius.

At the very dawn of the Renaissance, in 1435, the architect and writer L.B. Alberti defined beauty as harmony, right proportions and interplay of parts. This theory persisted after two centuries of the Renaissance, saying that if you like something, it is only because of the internal order and proportions. This view has become a common concept of Europe.¹⁵

In 1550, G. Cardano, adopting the idea of subtlety from the mannerists and at the same time agreeing with the classics that beauty is simple and clear, and subtlety is complicated, claimed that unraveling it brings as much satisfaction as beauty itself. The idea of Mannerism, prevailing next to the Great Theory in the 16th century, caused a search for beauty not only in harmony, literary mannerism found beauty in a trope or metaphor. Some, apart from beauty, also saw grace, others reduced beauty to grace and charm. Cardinal Bembo, combining almost all theories in this field, decided that beauty is a grace born of proportion, appropriateness and harmony. However, most opponents of the Great Theory believed that the source of beauty-grace was freedom and carelessness.

In the mid-17th century, the French painter Poussin claimed that matter is beautiful if there is order, measure and form in it.

The Great Theory lasted also in the era of baroque and academism (second half of the 17th century). French architect Blondel recognized that harmony is the source of the satisfaction that art gives. It was no different when it comes to music theory or philosophy. In Leibniz's opinion, "the pleasure that the sight experiences in proportion is of the same nature, as well as the pleasure provided by the senses,"¹⁶ although he also had doubts as to the rationality of beauty, which cannot be explained and can only be given by examples.

In the 17th century there was an increase in subjectivizing and relativizing the beauty of views. Descartes wrote that beauty is the attitude of our judgment to an object, Pascal that it is decided by fashion, and Spinoza decided that if we were built differently, ugly things would be beautiful for us and beautiful things ugly. The great French architect

¹⁵ The great Dürer, at the beginning of the 16th century, recognized that no figure can be perfect without proper proportion.

¹⁶ W. Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

Claude Perrault at the end of the 17th century stated that beauty is only a matter of habit and association. Certain proportions were considered absolutely beautiful just because we were used to them.

The Great Theory ruled for twenty-two centuries, during which it was supplemented, met with reservations and at the same time other theories arose. However, it should be recognized that this greatest theory of all time, despite the lack of a precise definition of beauty, despite too many fractions of it, gave a sense of unity of the idea.

4. CHANGE OF STATUS

The Great Theory was modeled on classical art and literature, while the tastes of late baroque or romantic culture were completely different. In the 18th century, it experienced a crisis that had a dual source: in philosophy and in art. It manifested itself most strongly in England and Germany. Criticism of the traditional understanding of beauty, initiated already in the previous century by philosophers, e.g. Spinoza, Descartes, Leibniz, was supported in the publications of Addison and Diderot. Greater emphasis was placed on psychological research into human response to beauty, which has reversed the view of beauty.

The theory has emerged that beauty is something elusive, so no theory can describe it. In supporting philosophers such as Leibniz and Montesquieu, it was believed that beauty could only be felt, not described in words or concepts, which undermined the validity of any theory of beauty.

Other critics rejected the objectivity of beauty (especially in England), considering that beauty is not the shape of things as it has been so far, but the shape of experiences. The eighteenth-century philosopher Hume believed that beauty is not a quality of a thing but exists in the mind of a person who sees it, and everyone perceives a different beauty. Thus, in the opinion of the critics of the Great Theory, whether we find something beautiful depends on our reaction and its source is not so much the proportion of the object as the feeling it evokes in us. Giordano Bruno argued that there is no absolute beauty, that what is beautiful for some, is no attraction for others. Knowing beauty no longer depends on reason, but, for example, as Addison argued, on imagination, or Gerard – on taste. In Pascal, however, we find the opinion that what is beautiful is most often determined by fashion.

It should be noted that not only has the view of what is beautiful changed, but also what is the subject of theoretical considerations. Earlier, the Great Theory described what beauty is and in the 18th century attention was focused not so much on creating a new theory of beauty, but primarily on creating a theory of experiencing beauty. There were still theories of beauty accompanying or modifying the Great Theory, but none of them had an advantage over the others.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the types of beauty were divided into: persuasive and arbitrary (Claude Perrault), essential and natural, and great and grateful (Fr. Y.M. André), and beauty for which we have recognition (Crousaz). Classics from the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Testelin, distinguished the beauty of utility from the beauty of convenience, novelty and rarity. J.G. Sulzer (18th century) separated graceful beauty, magnificent and fiery beauty, while Frederick Schiller (turn of the 18th and 19th century) proposed to divide beauty into naive and sentimental.

The typical position in the eighteenth-century aesthetics was the abandonment of the general theory or the recognition of the psychological theory of aesthetic experience. Another position was pluralism based on the conceptual distinction of beauty, which was mentioned above. This age became a turning point also due to the emergence of a separate science of beauty. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, supported by Charles Batteux and Johann Georg Sulzer, contributed to the name of this separate philosophical discipline, which is aesthetics. Before this happened, aesthetic categories – beauty, art, aesthetic experience – were established, their interrelationships and the accuracy of their linguistic counterparts were examined.

The nineteenth century, especially its first half, brought a renewed interest in the doctrines of the Great Theory. In the first half of the century, Plato's idealistic formula of beauty enjoyed the greatest interest – beauty is the revelation of an idea. Thus, beauty continued to be an essential concept of aesthetics, and for a thing to be beautiful it was the identity of ideas and phenomena. This way of looking at beauty has become typical for all of Europe. It was expressed not only by philosophers but also by people of literature.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, interest in beauty weakened, among others, because the prevailing doctrines were considered inadequate because they did not fully exhaust the issue of beauty. It was the moment when beauty lost its long-held position as the basic concept of aesthetics in favor of the emerging theories of aesthetic experience.

The twentieth century brought a complete retreat from traditional aesthetic evaluation. Both artists and art theorists have recognized that beauty is not the highest value when it comes to aesthetic experience. It is not even a factor necessary for art to exist, be it for survival or the work of art itself. The delight over the beauty was replaced by a shock, which was to stimulate the reception of the work.

The attitude characteristic of twentieth-century aesthetes was to question the validity of questions about what beauty or art is. There was an interest in the correctness of the concepts, which led to the conclusion that the concept of beauty is not a correct concept, and consequently replaced it with an aesthetic term. On the other hand, in colloquial language, where it is less strict and unambiguous, the term beauty began to function mainly as a description of preferences.

However, the analysis of the concept of beauty was not completely abandoned and efforts were made (started in the 17th and continued in the 18th and 19th centuries) to narrow its scope. One of the leading aesthetes of the twentieth century, Benedetto Croce, following in the footsteps of Herbart (nineteenth century), recognized that the notion of beauty belongs not to all things that are so called, but only to some, unique. According to this ideology, it is necessary to eliminate from the scope of the concept of beauty those things which do not qualify for pure, absolute or objective beauty. These are usually elements that only provide entertainment, joy or excitement – in colloquial speech, however, often referred to as beautiful.

However changeable, the concept of beauty was, is and will accompany us and will be analyzed. In conclusion, it is worth recalling the statement of the Nobel Prize laureate – the most outstanding German writer of the first half of the twentieth century – Paul Thomas Mann: “The essence of a myth is the eternal return, timelessness, eternal present.”¹⁷

¹⁷ M. Szynkiewicz, *Teorie ostateczne w naukach przyrodniczych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2009, p. 60.

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