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IN THE LABYRINTH OF BEAUTY. FIGHT FOR VALUES IN THE WORLD OF ANTI-CULTURE

W LABIRYNCIE PIĘKNA. WALKA O WARTOŚCI W ŚWIECIE ANTYKULTURY

Abstract

The text analyzes issues related to culture, anti-culture and beauty. It emphasizes the need to restore the proper meaning to basic concepts that are often confused or distorted in today's society. The article considers the concept of beauty and its importance in the history of philosophy and aesthetics. At the same time, it tries to explain why in the modern world there is an increasingly frequent lack of appreciation for the values of artistic workshops and the cult of amateur culture.

Keywords: beauty, ugliness, culture, anti-culture

Streszczenie

Tekst analizuje kwestie związane z kulturą, anty-kulturą oraz pięknem. Podkreśla potrzebę przywrócenia właściwego sensu podstawowym pojęciom, które często są mylone lub zniekształcone w dzisiejszym społeczeństwie. Artykuł rozważa koncepcje piękna i jego znaczenie w historii filozofii i estetyki. Jednocześnie stara się wyjaśnić, dlaczego we współczesnym świecie coraz częściej obserwuje się brak uznania dla wartości warsztatu artystycznego oraz kultury amatorskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: piękno, brzydota, kultura, antykultura

1. CULTURE VS. CIVILIZATION

When considering issues related to beauty, it should be noted that we are witnessing the destruction of culture, therefore it is necessary to restore the proper content to basic concepts that have been distorted or blurred today. Many definitions of culture are wrongly attributed to the definition of civilization and vice versa. It seems obvious, but very often, both in scientific journals and in everyday informal conversations, these two concepts are not distinguished. Taking into account the breadth of the topic discussed, it is worth emphasizing that this text is of an introductory nature, but it can be a starting point for more detailed analyses related to an attempt to consider the relationship between culture and civilization. The differences between culture and civilization, as Krzysztof Karoń notes in his book "History of anticulture 1.0", are important and influence our understanding of society and history.

To put it simply, “culture is everything that a person does to make life difficult. Civilization is everything that man does to make his life easier”¹. The essence of culture is a certain mechanism contained in a person that prompts him to make effort and work to create a work of art. Because a product of culture is a work, a thing created by man. In other words, the biological nature of man is contrary to culture. Zbigniew Skorecki would say that culture is putting a “muzzle” on a person, i.e. morality. This state of affairs distinguishes us from animals, which limit their lives to satisfying their hunger and sexual drive. This is why historically recognized works of art were created, such as 11,000 B.C. Göbekli Tepe² (Ill. 1), because first humanity created culture and then civilization. Of course, every community may exhibit certain patterns and certain behaviors that should not be valued. If in a certain community one of the patterns is lying down and performing some ritual dance around a fire, then of course this custom belongs to the concept of culture, but in an anthropological context. This phenomenon should not be considered in the sense of this definition, which allowed early man to achieve a higher level of development. There is no doubt that man by nature constantly strives to satisfy basic needs at the lowest possible cost. “Therefore, the entire history of culture is a history of enslavement and defense against enslavement, and the most important argument in this fight is force”³. The modern fight against the fundamental value of work ethos, the fight against institutions that can reliably assess work, means that society does not create prosperity, and therefore it must use the only way out of this critical situation: it must steal this prosperity. Taking into account the extensive issues discussed in the text, it is important to note that the article is an introduction to the topic, but may constitute a starting point for more detailed analyses related to an attempt to understand contemporary anticulture.

2. ART AS A MANIFESTATION OF CULTURE

Considerations about beauty should begin by recalling the question asked by St. Augustine: “whether something is beautiful because it is liked, or whether it is liked because it is beautiful”⁴. To this question, Augustine answers that “it is liked because it is beautiful”⁵. Throughout the history of aesthetics, there have been many answers to the question of beauty. The beginning could have been the sentence of the first of the Sophists – Protagoras of Abdera, who wrote, *homo mensura omnium* – “the measure of all things is man; existing ones, that they are, and non-existing ones, that they are not”⁶. The measure of beauty is also a person who sometimes likes this, sometimes something else, sometimes this and sometimes that. In the history of aesthetics, this subjective and relativistic answer was often considered the most important. Stefan Morawski analyzed Burke’s 17th-century concept of beauty: “Sensual impressions, ideas and feelings – elements of aesthetic experience. The psychological elements of an aesthetic experience are twofold: on the one hand: sensual

¹ K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury 1.0. Podstawy wiedzy społecznej*, first ed., revised, Krzysztof Karoń, Warszawa 2021, p. 76.

² Göbekli Tepe is an ancient archaeological site located in southeastern Turkey, close to the city of Şanlıurfa, which probably served the purpose of worship.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 528.

⁴ W. Tatariewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2006, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Plato, *Teajtet*, Antyk, Kęty 1999, 151e–152b.

(impressions and ideas), on the other: emotional (related to the senses – simple and complex feelings)”⁷. In this concept, the question was not what beauty is, but how it happens that we like something, that there is something in a person that allows us to believe that something is beautiful or ugly. Burke called it taste and looked for a criterion for this taste. In turn, Hume states that “the perception of any beauty (beauty of all kinds), and therefore also the beauty contained in a work of art, is associated with experiencing ‘particular satisfaction and contentment’”⁸. Another aspect of beauty discussed in the discipline of aesthetics was function. Here we should refer to the words of Plato, who distinguished a whole range of situations in which something is liked because it is useful. He wrote about the appropriateness of something for something. “The philosophers of classical Greece considered the truest beauty to be the spiritual, moral beauty of character, the intellectual beauty of thought”⁹. In turn, Socrates considered the determinants of beauty to be purposefulness and usefulness, or an experience that is pleasing to the eye and ear. Władysław Tatarkiewicz lists three historical theories of beauty:

A. Beauty in the broadest sense. This was the original Greek concept, which also included moral beauty, i.e. the domain not only of aesthetics, but also of ethics. [...] B. Beauty in a purely aesthetic sense. It included only what evokes aesthetic experiences; instead, it included everything that causes such an experience – whether it be color, sound or thought. This concept of beauty has over time become a fundamental concept of European culture. C. Beauty in the aesthetic sense, but limited to the realm of sight. In this sense, only shape and color could be beautiful. This concept of beauty was used already in antiquity, namely by the Stoics.¹⁰

Krystyna Tuszyńska-Maciejewska found the modern concept of beauty in the sophistic, writing:

however, it is worth noting that the sophistic approach to beauty is similar to the modern one – beauty is perceived sensually and individually, the boundaries of beauty are set subjectively, and the interpretation of a work of art is also subjective. Being an aesthetic experience, beauty becomes a fleeting state of mind.¹¹

Krzysztof Karoń writes that:

The entire history of art is a history of successive, often radical breakthroughs, but art has never abandoned its idiom, clear already in the Stone Age, and has always – regardless of the content conveyed – been an expression of the cult of painstaking, planned and creative work, striving for workshop perfection, and perfect work. Meanwhile, contemporary art is without exception an expression of chaos, chance, mediocrity, destruction, ugliness and, ultimately, pathology. In this sense, it is not a continuation, but a negation of all contemporary art.¹²

⁷ S. Morawski, *Studia z historii myśli estetycznej XVIII i XIX wieku*, Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1961, p. 30.

⁸ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Penguin Books, London 1985, p. 349, as cited in: A. Grześliński, *Angielski spór o istotę piękna. Koncepcje estetyczne Shaftesbury'ego i Burke'a*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2001, p. 44.

⁹ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 139–140.

¹¹ K. Tuszyńska-Maciejewska, *Platona pytanie o piękno*, “Collectanea Philologica”, 1999, no. 3, p. 126.

¹² K. Karoń, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

The Russian communist Vladimir Lenin in 1902 in the book “What to do?” (a guide for revolutionaries) stated that the revolution could only be carried out by an elite party of professional revolutionaries using the means of professional propaganda and art. This idea is intended to influence the masses, whom he wrote about as “not being ours”¹³. Discussions about beauty as an objective value should be guided by the idea that there is something important at the basis of it, some unity about which the Neoplatonists wrote. Because Plotinian metaphysics is a metaphysics of unity. For an anonymous writer, the so-called “Pseudo-Dionysius” beauty is a matter of proportion and splendor, “euarmostia kai Aglaia”, that is, it consists in good proportion and splendor, that is, delight. Plato’s symposium showed how through beauty one can reach love and how through love (eros¹⁴) one can reach beauty. Eryksimachos recognizes that in unity, despite internal differences, there is internal harmony. Aristotle believed that “beauty is conditioned by proportion, order and good arrangement”¹⁵. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose main source on this matter was Pseudo Dionysius, “pulchra dicuntur quae visa placent” (beautiful things are those which, once seen, please)¹⁶. He writes that beauty consists in proper proportion and splendor, which the scholastics in the 13th century called “claritas”¹⁷. Władysław Stróżewski asks the question: “why is that which is a recreation, construction or expression capable of delighting, moving or shocking: after all, sometimes a simple acceptance, recognition of an object as a work of art is enough for us, at other times we refuse to recognize it, even if we feel moved by it”¹⁸. Stróżewski does not directly answer this question, but proposes the conditions that should be fulfilled for a work to be called a work, these are: “the ontics of the work (the subject of its ontology), the meaning side of the work (the subject of semiotics) and the value side of the work (the subject of axiology)”¹⁹. Stróżewski gives the factors that condition beauty, he says: “if we grasp how what this beauty is, we will find that it comes first. It is not what constitutes it, what conditions it, but, as it were, the other way around – it is what conditions it, which, as a result, leads to the appearance of this form (if beauty can be said to be considered a form)”²⁰. Zbigniew Herbert referred to taste in his poem *The Power of Taste*. He wrote:

*Who knows if we were better and more beautifully tempted
If there were sent pink women as flat as a wafer
Or fantastic creations from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch
But hell at that time was what
Wet pit, murderers barrack
Called the palace of justice
A self-absorbed Mephisto in a Lenin jacket
He sent Aurora’s grandchildren into the field*

¹³ W. Lenin, *Co robić? Pałace zagadnienia naszego ruchu*, Wydawnictwo Partyjne, Moskwa 1933, p. 141.

¹⁴ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, vol. 1: *Filozofia starożytna i średniowieczna*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2009, p. 109.

¹⁵ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka starożytna*, Arkady, Warszawa 1985, p. 154.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

¹⁷ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁸ W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna. Szkice z estetyki*, Universitas, Kraków 2002, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ O pięknie. Wykład prof. Władysława Stróżewskiego [in:] Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 1.02.2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR5Tx9H2g5M&t=3907s> (access: 7.05.2023).

*Boys with potato faces
Very ugly girls with red hands
[...]
So aesthetics can be helpful in life
The study of beauty should not be neglected
Before making an accession one must diligently study
the shape of architecture, the rhythm of drums and pipes
official colors the sordid ritual of funerals²¹*

Herbert proposed a non-political basis for resistance to the communist idea. How can “ugly girls” be liked? There are times when something is liked and nothing good follows. In the case described by Herbert, behind those lousy faces, behind the vulgar speech went a bad system. As Władysław Stróżewski said, “the system of enslaving thoughts and feelings of socialism, a totalitarian, commanding system. To like is to like what ultimately pleases the party. The basic idea was formulated in the phrase ‘art, literature, sculpture, painting, music, architecture is to be national in form and socialist in content’”²². On the other hand, the founder of the ideology of communism – Karl Marx – believed that art should be a tool of class struggle, should serve revolutionary purposes and is the main driving force in history and society, thus ignoring other factors affecting society: culture, religion, race or gender. Marx believed that art is one of the products of culture, which is produced and consumed by society, and its form and content are determined by prevailing class relations. Human creations: any artistic activity or religion (“the imaginary happiness of the people”²³) are superfluous. He wrote:

Religion is the sigh of an oppressed creature, the heart of an unfeeling world, it is the soul of soulless relations. Religion is the opium of the people. The true happiness of the people requires the abolition of religion as the delusional happiness of the people. To require someone to abandon illusions about his situation is to require the abandonment of a situation that cannot do without illusions [...]. Criticism of religion frees man from illusions in order to think, act, and shape his own reality as a man who has given up illusions and come to his senses; to revolve around himself, and therefore around his real sun. Religion is only an imaginary sun, which continues to revolve around man until man revolves around himself.²⁴

French philosopher Jacques Derrida, on the other hand, believed that works of art are not unambiguous and do not have a fixed meaning, since interpretations of a work are always linked to the cultural and social context in which the work was created. In this way, Derrida pointed out that art cannot be seen as something fixed and unchanging, but as something that is open to different interpretations and analyses. Art has always been a reflection of some ideology, represented by power. Historically, art was the ideology of the people in power, who gained power by force. It was power that hired artists to create “works of art”. But shouldn’t art be free from political interference and be created for its own sake, and not as a tool of

²¹ Z. Herbert, *Wiersze zebrane*, R. Krynicki (ed.), Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2008, pp. 523–524.

²² *O pięknie...*, *op. cit.*

²³ K. Marks, *Przyczynek do krytyki heglowskiej filozofii i prawa. Wstęp*, Studenckie Koło Filozofii Marksistowskiej UW, Warszawa 2005, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

political propaganda? At this point it is necessary to recall the words of Lech Nemoyevsky, who wrote about the need to restore the *spiritus movens* that will make science beautiful, and beauty – wisdom. After all, “the pyramids were built by the pride of the Pharaohs with the hands of multitudes of slaves under the whips of the chasers, and the wonders of German industrial architecture were built by the passion of the hands of millions of slaves under the patronage of our ‘dear’ colleague Speer”²⁵. André Breton, the main theoretician and leader of the Surrealist movement, preached:

the need to remove the barrier between dream and reality, to appeal to the irrational dispositions of man, allowing him to receive messages from the world belonging simultaneously to subjective and objective reality, that is, to the surreal: ‘surrealite’. [...] Surrealism was to become a method of psychological liberation, compromising the absurdities of the ‘old order’; it was to create conditions for the free manifestation of man’s imagination and give him opportunities for full expression, exposing such values as freedom, imagination, love. Among all forms of human activity and human expression, surrealism brought to the forefront art that expands the boundaries of cognition and is based on unusual associations, on new categories of beauty, such as absurdity or miraculousness.²⁶

Art is the most enduring manifestation of culture, which creates the human psyche, because it speaks through emotions. Art can be received, absorbed, without understanding it. The diagnosis of the state of affairs formulated by Krzysztof Karoń should be made firmly. Historically, the most important role of art, which, regardless of the style or era, consisted in the pursuit of mastery of the artist’s craft. Only the concept of the goals and mechanisms of the so-called “anti-culture” makes it possible to understand the meaning of contemporary art: its contempt for the workshop and the cult of amateurism (Ill. 2). Niemojewski also finds defects in the training of these artists. He writes: “The mistake of architects is that, having neglected their studies, they let their intuition and senses run wild excessively”²⁷. Considerations of beauty seem to have no end, for as Schiller wrote: “The study of beauty, which almost no part of aesthetics can omit, leads me into more distant regions, where problems that are completely unfamiliar to me lie. And yet ultimately I must embrace the whole if I want to accomplish something satisfactory”²⁸. Trying to conclude the consideration of culture, anti-culture and beauty, it is necessary to quote the words of Dariusz Kozłowski, which could summarize it: “Less ideology, more geometry” (heard).

3. SUMMARY

When considering the issues of beauty, culture and anti-culture, it is important to note that modern society is struggling with the destruction of culture and confusion around concepts such as culture, civilization and beauty. Accordingly, it is necessary to restore proper

²⁵ L. Niemojewski, *Uczniowie cieśli. Rozważania nad zawodem architekta*, Trzaska, Evert i Michalski, Warszawa 1948, p. 210.

²⁶ A. Breton, *Manifest surrealizmu*, A. Sandauer (transl.), p. 109, <https://www.sandauer.pl/obrazki/file/biblioteka/Andre-Breton-Manifest-surrealizmu.pdf> (access: 7.05.2023).

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

²⁸ F. Schiller, *Kallias, czyli o pięknie*, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty 2007, p. 33.

definitions to basic concepts that have now become distorted or blurred. Culture is an area that encompasses everything a person does to enrich his life, often through the creation of works and the formation of morals. It is the aspect that distinguishes us from animals, directing us toward creation and improvement. On the other hand, civilization is the sphere of human activities aimed at making life easier, creating comfortable living conditions. Culture is the result of effort and work on the work, while civilization is directed at eliminating difficulties from everyday life. The history of aesthetics brings us a variety of concepts of beauty. Ancient Greek philosophy emphasized the importance of proportion, harmony and spiritual beauty, which was manifested in arts such as music, dance and architecture, which were closely related to rhythm and number. Modern approaches are often based on subjectivism and individuality in the perception of beauty. Art has always been a reflection of ideology and power. At various times, works of art have been used as tools of political propaganda. In conclusion, the consideration of culture and beauty is complex and multidimensional. The current challenges of transforming culture and understanding beauty require deeper reflection and understanding of their context. It is important to emphasize that art is an enduring expression of culture, and contemporary phenomena such as disrespect for creative work can lead to its degradation. Striving to preserve cultural values and develop the concept of beauty is important for building a more harmonious society.



III. 1. *Göbekli Tepe*, Turkey, about 9500 and 8000 BCE, Neolithic archaeological site Göbekli Tepe (c. 9500 BCE); TaylanOzgurUksal, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, Source: www.artincontext.org/gobekli-tepe (access: 02.08.2022).



III. 2. *Duchamp smoking in front of Fountain*, Duchamp Retrospective, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963, Robert Berman Gallery Santa Monica, San Francisco; photo Julian Wasser; source: www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/andre-breton/figure (access: 02.08.2022).

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