

Theories of Beauty: Synopsis

Kant says that when we find something to be beautiful, we stop thinking about it though our senses remain fully engaged in the contemplation of its form. Thus it becomes for us a pure perception. This is a left sided 18th Century formulation of the right side of the brain. Let me confess that I am a recovering Kantian. Making prints is part of my twelve-step program

Aristotle is another left sider. For Aristotle, art is a craft or technology* that alters perception and emotion. In the *Poetics* he states that the aim of tragedy is to produce pity, fear and wonder so as to bring about a pleasurable cleansing, or *katharsis*, of these affects. If we are to consider artistic beauty in these terms, we would have to consider it in terms of the effectiveness of its technology in producing a pleasure appropriate to its genre.

Plato believes that beauty is a daimonic force that violently takes hold of our senses and deranges our minds. This causes philosophers to seek truth, but leads artists and just about everybody else to debauchery. Plato's leaning toward the right, and I'm not just referring to his politics. It's my opinion that he was of Sappho's party without knowing it—or, perhaps, acknowledging it.

For Nietzsche, the world that we know is at best a beautiful illusion, and under the terms that most of us live in it, a lie. And neither the world

nor beauty have any intrinsic reality. Such an illusion is necessary because human existence is fundamentally pointless and abject, and were we to realize this, our lives would become intolerable. Beauty and its illusions are events that permit us to find meaning in the world, and this deception allows life to continue. The source of all beautiful illusions is a drive or instinct whose consummate effect is the production of representational art. Therefore our capacity to make art and our ability to find meaning in life—or, to even exist as conscious beings—all owe their existence to the same instinct. And, indeed, before anything else, this instinct is an art instinct. Thus life can be redeemed only through art, and Nietzsche calls this instinct the “Apollinian.”

*Anything that involves the use of a tool or technique is a *tekhne* which translates as “skill,” “art,” “craft,” or “technology.” For Aristotle, all these English words would describe the same thing.