

## HOW BEAUTY IS DYING

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### ABSTRACT

In his essay, the author reflects on the death of ‘beauty’ within the context of the present state of nature (the phenomenon of the forest and its problems), modern art (the transformations within visual art) and language (the demise of dialects, the destruction of language by contemporary ideologies). The fact that ‘beauty’ is not merely a subjective category and is not purely a matter of individual taste means that we can rationally discuss its renewal (nature), the talent, craftsmanship and diligence involved (art), and the relationship between language ideas and thoughts (how ‘nicely’ we speak).

### Keywords

Beauty; Nature; Art; Language

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2023.3

Let us start with the Greek myth about the beauty of Adonis. He had the misfortune of catching the eye of the goddess Aphrodite, who was not averse to including humans among her prey. When she spotted the handsome Adonis, a nineteen-year-old young man with a beard so soft that a kiss from him was supposedly poetry, then she was unable to resist him, and another Greek erotic affair began. But that was not all – through Aphrodite’s carelessness, Adonis came to the attention of a fellow goddess, Persephone, the icy ruler of the underworld, who also fell for Adonis. In the end, Zeus decided that during the spring and summer the young man was to be with Aphrodite on earth, while the other six months would be spent in the ‘service’ of Persephone in the underworld. Ultimately, however, it was never about

his adventures as he died young while hunting a wild boar, and so we never discover if he enjoyed this journeying to and fro. In any case, the more likely interpretation is that it concerns the changing of the seasons, the alternation between life and death, and the constant cycle of life.<sup>1</sup> For the Greeks, there is an echo here of the fondness for beautiful young men, something which was to become immoral in the stricter Judeo-Christian environment. However, there are other aspects to the story of this man. Adonis is worn out by two femmes fatales. His beauty has to be divided; it is not and cannot be eternal, even if he is admired by goddesses. His beauty must die because it does not have an Olympian sheen: it is subject to the tragedy of this world, which is too dangerous for beauty to endure within it. Our world can only hold on to beauty for a short time, not forever; beauty changes – like happiness or health. Despite her efforts, not even the goddess Aphrodite is able to bring the hero back to life. The beauty of youth crumbles to dust. Here on earth, beauty passes quickly or slowly, expectedly or unexpectedly. Its transience should serve as a warning to those who set great store by it.

Of course, the transience of beauty does not mean that beauty cannot be a value that is ‘sworn to’, a value which, even in its fleetingness, might be placed above ethical or metaphysical values. Romanticism has had a huge influence on the modern era with its elevated appreciation of beauty, particularly in art and nature. This can be highlighted by at least three tendencies: the individualisation of the artist in the form of appreciating exceptional talent (the Romantic genius, people such as Goethe and Beethoven whose works connect Classicism and Romanticism); the loosening of Christian teachings in the form of different non-orthodox trends which not only brought about political radicalisation but also an alternative understanding of beauty; and finally in the Romantic ‘discovery’ of the people with their distinctive national cultural features, even though this discovery had a retroactive effect on artistic creation. In Romanticism, we can also see the origin of the ‘art of the everyday’ – a tendency towards a normal, common beauty, the beauty of ordinariness.<sup>2</sup> This sees the

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<sup>1</sup> There is nice interpretation by Bedřich Fučík and Jindřich Pokorný in: Heslo ‘Krásný jako Adonis,’ in *Zakopaný pes aneb o tom, jak, proč a kde vznikla některá slova, jména, rčení, úsloví, pořekadla a přísloví* (Prague: Albatros, 2001), 122–124.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

beginnings of the modernist clash between the old and the new, which in the nineteenth century, but especially in the twentieth century, not only resulted in disputes concerning the avant-garde in art but also the definitive severance of artistic values from the values of perfection in craftwork, together with the emergence of the ‘everyday’ and ‘ugliness’ in the world of art.

In this essay, I shall attempt to discuss three ways in which beauty is dying. First, we shall consider the demise of nature as a type of ‘creation’, the fate of which lies to a great extent in the hands of man. Here, I shall draw inspiration from the works of Václav Cílek and his colleagues. Then we shall consider beauty in works of art, referring to the ideas of Sir Roger Scruton – a renaissance figure who covered several disciplines, including aesthetics. And at the end, we will devote a few lines to the beauty of language as both a means of communication as well as a form of expression which follows us from the cradle to the grave as our mother tongue and is inextricably linked to our thinking and enables us to be human. For this third point, we will refer to a neglected work by the essayist Petr Fidiš.

## 1. How Nature is Dying

Unfortunately, various climatic and other natural disasters appear to be a fixed part of our lives now. I have experienced this first-hand during my regular visits to the forests of the Drahan Highlands in Moravia. Over the past few years, a large area of forest from Boskovice to Protivanov and the surrounding area has been destroyed by bark beetles and other factors. This has resulted in large, new clearings, with logging at a much greater scale. Even the layperson cannot ignore the changes to the environment which affect their everyday lives. When faced by these changes, it is possible to offer a few preliminary remarks about the environment as well as our desire to ‘save’ beauty at all costs.

Nature is undoubtedly beautiful, but there has to be one important precondition – from mankind’s perspective, it has to be under control. And so the apple tree in our own garden is beautiful as it grows, blossoms, and bears fruit. This beauty is somewhat diminished if we look into ‘nature’s kitchen’ and recognise the Darwinian environment in which nature operates. Here the struggle for life is incredibly hard compared with the human world, and its possible (though not always applied) recourse through reason and the awareness of community

and empathy. Although nature is incapable of the ‘dehumanisation’ which we observe in people during times of war, consciousness, which again features today in scientific studies, still creates a differential basis to which can be added other distinctions between human, animal, and natural phenomena. This element has a rich intellectual tradition. Beauty will entirely disappear if mankind loses control over nature – some telling current examples are the Australian forest fires, the spread of African locusts, and the coronavirus. A lack of control can certainly be caused by inadvertent human intervention or systemic faults (climate change caused by humans), but that does not change the fact that nature out of control is dangerous for humans and not only causes problems but also diminishes its beauty for us. The idea of a summer fire beside a cottage with romantic evening hues and a star-studded sky is an idyllic vision, unlike a burning forest.<sup>5</sup>

The reality of ‘control’ is undoubtedly connected to issues of power and the old-fashioned mastery of nature. In the modern era, expressions such as power and mastery have been replaced by the word care.<sup>4</sup> However, this change has not really altered the essence of the matter, even if the word ‘care’ sounds more altruistic and less exploitative. Care can also have its imperfections (misplaced, untrained, excessive care), not to mention that it is through care that we express our power over the ‘cared one’ as well as a certain protective role. Therefore, among other things, beauty also depends on a level of care. This is shown very aptly in the natural landscape of the forest.

A forest is a complex natural formation that has been much discussed over recent decades in connection with the soil and water, but also in relation to its aesthetic and even therapeutic qualities.<sup>5</sup> It is an

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<sup>5</sup> By coincidence, I am writing this as part of the area known as Bohemian Switzerland in flames. Such forest fires are very rare in the Czech Republic and are more reminiscent of the summer fires in southern countries such as Greece.

<sup>4</sup> Modern concerns about the use of the word ‘power’ and the attempts to replace it strike me as somewhat infantile. If we understand power to mean responsibility and competency, as the Canadian clinical psychologist and ‘media celebrity’ Jordan Peterson writes in his books and lectures, then any concerns about ‘power’ equating solely with ‘superiority’ are misplaced.

<sup>5</sup> Here, we are referring to a comprehensive publication by Václav Cílek, Martin Polívka, and Zdeněk Vacek, *Český a moravský les. Jeho počátky, současný stav a výhled do budoucnosti* (Praha: Dokořán, 2022), which also features other specialists. Here, Václav Kinský discussed the ‘beauty of the forest’: he reflects on forest management, on the beauty, picturesqueness and majesty of works by important painters and writers who have been inspired by this phenomenon. The main contribution of his study is the ‘aesthetic of managed forests’ (pp. 363–375).

incredible natural phenomenon, the development of which corresponds to approximately one human lifespan – a phenomenon which represents the symbiosis of trees, their root systems, fungi, plants, and animals. From an ecological perspective, there is currently a debate surrounding the issue of spruce and pine trees – i.e. the ‘monocultures’ which, since the time of the Enlightenment, have been introduced into the Czech lands for practical reasons. However, this does not mean that spruce forests, for example, are not beautiful. As we have become used to them, we can wander safely in them; we can find mushrooms and shade there as well as peace and quiet. It has been shown that the future lies not in the removal of spruce forests but in having a greater plurality of trees, so-called mixed forests, which certainly also have their own magic (moreover, they reflect the older, pre-Enlightenment image of the Czech landscape) and will evidently be more resilient in the future. In terms of harmony and beauty, they represent a greater variety and can be happily admired hour after hour.

Let us pause for a moment at this characteristic of ‘natural beauty’. Unlike manmade artistic creations, there is no limit to our admiration of natural formations due to their character, colourfulness, and mutability. Certainly, there are natural formations where this is not the case, such as deserts, which can fascinate us for a shorter time but which lack the features we can observe in nature in Central Europe with its seasonal cycles. Mankind has a natural evolutionary proximity to nature, even if there are some people who do not necessarily feel it. They might not go into the garden or forest, but they will at least have imitation wooden worktops fitted in the kitchen.

Natural beauty is dying out around us, even if it is very difficult for us to decide the extent to which this is due to direct human intervention or more profound changes; the causes and effects of this phenomenon are more difficult to study while finding ways to improve the existing situation is equally problematic. There is a human intervention which almost immediately can be seen as being wrongheaded. This includes systemic intervention against nature as a result of ideology (the crass changes to land systems brought about by unifying fields under state socialism accompanied by the liquidation of the peasantry<sup>6</sup>), priori-

<sup>6</sup> Here, I feel the need to emphasise the relationship between the liquidation of nature and a social class, which was the catastrophic result of the communists’ attempt to create a total society, which the Third Republic unfortunately also had a role in. Cf. Karel Jech, *Soumrak selského stavu 1945-1960* (Praha: ÚSD AV ČR, 2001).

tising purely practical aspects (the short-sighted and ill-considered felling of forests in the pursuit of profit), the challenge of improving management (while it is possible to find Czech workers for logging, it is more difficult when it comes to the plantation and maintenance of forests), marginalising modern scientific research, and so on. There is, of course, another extreme which places nature on a spiritual level. According to some social groups, which resemble religious sects, nature has transformed into an ‘overtly’ alive super-being with cognitive or even supernatural abilities which influence human life. For some people, the entire Earth is the old Greek Goddess Gaia, though shorn of the typical Greek parameters. It would seem to be a new kind of paganism, containing the illusion of the ‘goodness’ of nature which has been corrupted by mankind’s pride and greed. The Greek inspiration lies in the idea of a future harmony when mankind not only starts to treat nature with respect but accords it rights which are almost equal to those of mankind. Although modern neo-paganism takes on different forms, including ahistorical imitations of pagan rituals (Slavonic and Celtic), it would appear to be more a radical offshoot of Romanticism and therefore an expression of modernism. This can be seen in this social group’s critical attitude towards Christian and Judeo-Christian values in general. The radical nature of neo-paganism can even manifest itself in a rejection of the existence of mankind on Earth through the rejection of *proles* (offspring). Beauty is reduced to the beauty of nature without mankind. This is not even a scientifically sustainable argument, as mankind is part of nature, even if we are separated from it by certain specific features.

In Christian literature, ‘paganism’ is transformed into a narrative in which nature may have been anthropomorphised but is eventually involved in God’s story with humans, or – if it becomes enraged – it is ultimately subordinated to the ‘king of all gods’, i.e. to Christ. While we are talking about the example of the forest, it is nice to see in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955) the old forest full of living creatures which itself becomes alive. For a while, it appears that it will not join in the struggle against the evil which threatens the whole of Middle Earth, but it finally intervenes decisively in the fight against the wizard Saruman. Although Tolkien’s stories are full of mythology (Tolkien’s knowledge was second to none when it came to Beowulf and other European pagan sagas!), it could be said that the author largely constructs them, while nature is skilfully woven into the parables of

human stories which have a metaphysical aspect. Naturally, this example is no longer about reality but the ‘depiction of reality’<sup>7</sup> and does not fall into the category of nature dying and reviving but how it is conceived in literature.

## 2. How Art is Dying

As a human creation, art is essentially different to nature, even though there can be no doubt that it is also present in a primitive way amongst animals (there are birds which decorate their nests) and that it is impossible to place an insurmountable barrier between the two – aesthetic categories enable us to view and evaluate both worlds and consider their differences.

According to the British philosopher, aesthetician, and political scientist Roger Scruton (1944–2020), art is a space for the human imagination. Creations can then inhabit their own world, unlike the creations of the imagination, which seek a ‘simulacrum’ or an image from which ‘all veils of hesitation have been torn away’ and from which no distance is possible.<sup>8</sup> Integral to the imagination are convention, framing, and restraint. This differentiation enables us to judge the value of such works of art which are based on fantasy, such as films. Scruton made this point when he analysed Bergman’s film *Wild Strawberries*. The Swedish filmmaker eschewed the use of colour, and his work ‘illustrates the distinction between aesthetic interest and mere effect: the first creating a distance that the second destroys.’<sup>9</sup>

The conservative-minded Scruton then goes on to consider concepts such as the significance of the work, representation, and expression. The expression here is fundamental as it operates with unmistakable structures and thus creates the work’s uniqueness. For example, we could paraphrase Shakespeare’s line ‘to be or not to be’ as ‘to exist or not to exist; there’s the problem’, but the specifically chosen word already has its meaning in a given tradition with its existential angst and corresponding doctrine of ‘contingent being’.<sup>10</sup> The difference

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Francke, 1946).

<sup>8</sup> Roger Scruton, *Krásá. Velmi stručný úvod* [Beauty: A Very Short Introduction] (Praha: Oikúmené, 2021), 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 96.

between good and bad art lies in the difference between representation and expression (most B movies are quite good representations of absurd situations that draw people into their world without having any artistic purpose).

Art, of course, is dying out in thousands of different ways. We should not forget about the destruction of artworks in old and modern iconoclasm,<sup>11</sup> in the field of ideological hatred towards artworks, and in the sphere of war rampaging against cultural and educational institutions (as can be seen in Ukraine today). For the Czech (Czechoslovak) memory and memory institutions, it should be obligatory not only to remember but also to analyse the harsh as well as subtle ways in which the Communist Party persecuted artists who wanted to express themselves freely. Nor should we forget the system of censorship and self-censorship, the different forms of harassment, the various systems of permission, protectionism, favouritism towards artists who were 'party loyalists'. However, there was a significant paradox for the period of Normalisation after 1969: despite all of the restrictions, high-quality independent art was still being made, often thanks to the bravery and persistence of people who wanted to devote their lives to culture.

Scruton's differentiation also shows us another internal aspect of the demise of art – 'dying from within'. Modern art in particular is based more on emotions and representation while marginalising conventions and craftsmanship. Modernism is tainted by its interest in gestures, its ability to provoke and to shock, a tendency towards irony, casting off traditions and taboos, removing the appropriate distance, and originality at all costs. One wonders if these features of modern art, in particular visual art, do not cause a kind of 'emptiness' or abandonment of form, which, in the majority of cases, represents the basis of each creation. This is well illustrated in an abstract art form, such as music rather than visual art. Naturally, new musical forms can emerge, but the interpreters and composers are much more in the thrall of and 'determined' by musical traditions, conventions, and above all, skills.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, these remarks are not aimed against modern art as such or against the changes which have to accompany all creative endeavours. However, in visual art in particular, it is

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alain Besançon, *L'Image interdite. Une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclasme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000). Besançon relates iconoclasm to the modern art of the 19th century (France, England), and then especially to Russian abstract art (Kandinsky, Malevich).



possible to observe the above tendencies, which require some reflection. For example, it is impossible to ignore the disputes which surface with specific exhibition practices as part of discussions on postmodern art and its evaluation, which is related to the institutions and the entire community which have decision-making powers. Here it is possible to observe radical stances and disputes which reveal the shifting criteria for the quality of a work of art. Incidentally, it is not only possible to talk about the demise of art within the context of conflicts about how it is possible to exhibit and support art – if these disputes reach a certain level, they could prevent the support of any kind of art, thereby ‘killing’ it.

It is intriguing that sculpture often finds itself the subject of passionate disputes. The sculpture is long-lasting by its very nature and is often set within a historical context which provokes social polarisation. Before it had even been installed, Jaroslav Róna’s sculpture of Margrave Jobst on a horse had already raised controversy – and this was a fairly uncontentious historical character.<sup>12</sup> It is even more difficult for those wishing to depict a more modern theme or figure. Often the artists have to confront ‘popular anger’ on social media, even though they have fulfilled all the democratic requirements for agreeing and financing the sculpture in public spaces.

### 3. How Language is Dying

It is evident that language is not merely a means for understanding and communicating, even if these are its primary functions. It is also a way of symbolically organising the world and experiencing it. As Jan Sokol wrote: ‘It is not (...) just an instrument, because it also subtly guides and leads us, determining what can become an experience and in what form.’<sup>13</sup> According to Georg Gadamer, who, incidentally, Sokol also quotes, human language is characterised by the fact that we usually do not notice it (so-called self-forgetfulness), that it addresses itself to others (the realm of the ‘we’, the building of a community) and

<sup>12</sup> Even for the critics of the work, I would recommend watching a CD called *Odvaha/ Courage*, a documentary by Pavel Štingl about the making of Jaroslav Róna’s sculpture. Even the most obstinate opponents of the work come face to face with the tough, gruelling, and long-lasting work of a sculptor who deserves admiration. K2 and Czech Television, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Sokol, *Člověk jako osoba. Filosofická antropologie* (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2016).

is thus universal (it is not tied to what is present). (Cf. Gadamer, *Man and Language*).

Language, therefore, has profound cultural significance. 'A person who knows how to narrate or write well can conjure up a rich whole "world" in a few words, because they skilfully build on how the listener has constructed their own world. The words and sentences of the narrative are then supplemented by the listener's own experience, which can be incredibly rich and colourful.'<sup>14</sup>

Language and speech<sup>15</sup> is therefore of key importance in human life, but at the same time, it is also fragile, vulnerable and exploitable. It greatly depends on who taught us our mother tongue, how we mastered it, and how many other languages we have learned. Our language can be very primitive and can fail in its primary functions, which we are well aware of when we try to speak a foreign language. Language and the 'ability to speak' is a matter of talent but also of education and upbringing. Someone's language might be beautiful but also 'cluttered' with unsuitable expressions, it might be rich but overly complicated, it might be burdened with disorganised phrases, linguistic ballast and repetition. It is not at all surprising that we often talk about a misunderstanding which results from the fact that when people discuss something, they need not only the right linguistic tools but also a certain 'congruency of ideas'.

Historically speaking, specific languages have been dying out since the time of the Enlightenment as a result of centralisation and the idea that a 'national language' was necessary. This especially applied to dialects which no longer served the supposed nationwide interest. A typical example is the centralisation of the French language during the French Revolution, which is a good example of language centralisation, standardisation, and state requirements (the unified command of the 'national' army). Naturally, this did not apply only to France but also to other countries which provided a primary school education and therefore unified schooling. With the spread of literacy, the need for standardised forms of languages rose proportionally. The French example of the fight against the 'patois', featuring the famous bishop Abbé Grégoire, was later copied by other European countries,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Here, we are not distinguishing language and speech as was suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857– 1913), the Swiss structuralist, who examined language as a system and speech as its concrete form.

while something similar also happened in the New World (USA, Peru, Brazil).<sup>16</sup>

Language is also always threatened on a personal level by unrefined usage. On the other hand, its universality and social necessity are always going to be overseen by society and politics. I remember how I was influenced by Petr Fidelius's book *Jazyk a moc*<sup>17</sup> (Language and Power) when I was a university student. In this brilliant study, the author gave a detailed analysis of the 'language' of *Rudé právo*, the then-official newspaper of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The author took the language of communist propaganda seriously as he was aware that we could end up part of their game precisely if we underestimated it. It was not difficult for Fidelius to wade through the turgid sections of the unwieldy introductions, deformed in terms of ideas and language, and used 'detailed detective-like' research to extract from them the illogical structure of communist new-speak and the ideas which were hidden behind the language. He correctly and humorously uncovered the 'fairy-tale' basis of communist ideology, built on the remarkable symbol of the 'working people', on famous, albeit flawed heroes (Stalin), on untouchable institutions (the party), and finally on the ever-present enemies who threaten the 'kingdom of goodness' from within and without. Naturally, Fidelius also knew that language and its aesthetic functions could also be destroyed by non-communist 'gobbledegook', in particular by the 'semantic inflation', which can affect democratic as well as totalitarian regimes.

We are convinced of how a language can be beautiful thanks to our mother tongue, as we learned it 'from the inside out' as it were, and we have the greatest level of sensitivity towards it. The beauty of a language does not depend on using some kind of flowery speech, though nor does it mean resorting to a kind of linguistic purism. However, it is possible to recognise and objectively assess if someone's Czech (or any other language) 'has been elevated to a noble level', as the poet Jan Zahradníček wrote about another Czech poet, Josef Václav Sládek. The current position on language is more or less based on utility, even if there is greater urgency to distinguish between information and disinformation and between the truth, half-truths, and lies. The fact is that language 'betrays' us and tells us more about ourselves than we imagine – in particular, when we

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peter Burke, *Jazyky a společenství v raně novověké Evropě* (Prague: NLN, 2004), 145–146.

<sup>17</sup> Petr Fidelius, *Jazyk a moc* (Mnichov: Arkýř, 1985). The author, whose real name is Karel Palek (1948), is a university lecturer, philologist, and translator.

describe a situation inadequately and try to dominate the terrain we are operating in linguistically by using superfluous terminology; when we use platitudes; or when we use phrases that are borrowed unnecessarily from other languages when we could use our own. Language is a good servant, but only if we care for it and avoid abusing it. The Psalmist expresses the connection between the ‘heart’ and language thus:

Your tongue plots destruction,  
it's like a sharpened razor,  
You love evil rather than good,  
falsehood rather than speaking the truth,  
You love every harmful word,  
you deceitful tongue!<sup>18</sup>

These should be warning words for us: in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which we are a part of whether we are conscious of it or not, there is a quite clear connection between the ‘internal’ state of our being and language. If someone is deceitful (a word which often appears in the Bible), it is apparent when they open their mouth. If we are dying internally, this is also manifested outwardly.

## **In Conclusion**

Beauty is like a species of animal which is under threat. New ones may be created, but at the same time, they are dying out ‘in droves’ or may die out with our direct assistance. This is true and entirely obvious with something you can count – like whales. If their numbers are dwindling, then that makes them an endangered species. It is much more difficult to quantify beauty. Beauty is elusive, sensitive, and sometimes difficult to recognise amongst the rubble – in such cases, we should not abandon classical personifications. Beauty can also disappear if we refuse to understand it based on rational knowledge. It disappears when those without talent interfere in the craft of the talented. It can be destroyed by ideologies of all kinds. Villains often veil themselves in beautiful disguises and words. Occasionally, despite its morbid state, it will blossom where we least expect it. Beauty is certainly ephemeral, as was indicated by the introductory story of Adonis;

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<sup>18</sup> Psalm 52, 4–6.

moreover, it acquires different forms. It dies, but then it is reborn. And it does not only have to be from Apollonian or Dionysian traditions;<sup>19</sup> it lives in every age and does not avoid simple dwellings.

In slightly less figurative terms, as the modern age is basically an ambivalent age, we hear more about the 'search' for beauty rather than 'finding' it. This search is connected to the three important tendencies we mentioned and which form the background to specific examples. The first tendency is linked to the phenomenon of revolution and is also related to old forms of destroying allegedly outdated or 'enemy' values – these are forms of destroying artistic monuments, i.e. forms of iconoclasm. This often has a political context in the form of radical political movements which are opposed to the symbols of the alleged enemy. The second tendency is a form of destroying beauty 'from within', which is connected to a modern form of subjectivity that does not accept traditional concepts for evaluating beauty which contain evaluative criteria. The third tendency is the understanding of beauty as a value which is dependent on human creativity, which in a Christian environment might appear as the discovery of basic Christian symbolism, shorn of complex (kitsch) layers<sup>20</sup>, in a society-wide search for alternative forms of art, but also in the appreciation of natural beauties which are reliant on human influences (the diverse character of the environmental movement).

There is a certain subjective element to the evaluation of beauty involving personal preferences and interests, and to a certain extent, it is indeed a matter of taste. Alongside this, however, is the search for beauty using rational criteria, which allow us not only to talk about beauty and evaluate it within certain aesthetic categories but also to describe its condition and consider any necessary redress.

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<sup>19</sup> We are not doubting Friedrich Nietzsche's brilliant contribution (*The Birth of Tragedy: From the Spirit of Music*). We are simply suggesting that the Christian tradition also has an undoubted and perhaps even more easily documented influence on modern art – and its own understanding of the tragedy of life which Nietzsche rejected.

<sup>20</sup> Typical in this respect is the work with Christian symbols in the ecumenical community in Taizé in France, for whom it is important to have a monastic life freed from complexity in the form of simple chants in modest church surroundings.