

Theodor W. Adorno
**On the Concept
of Beauty**

01/08

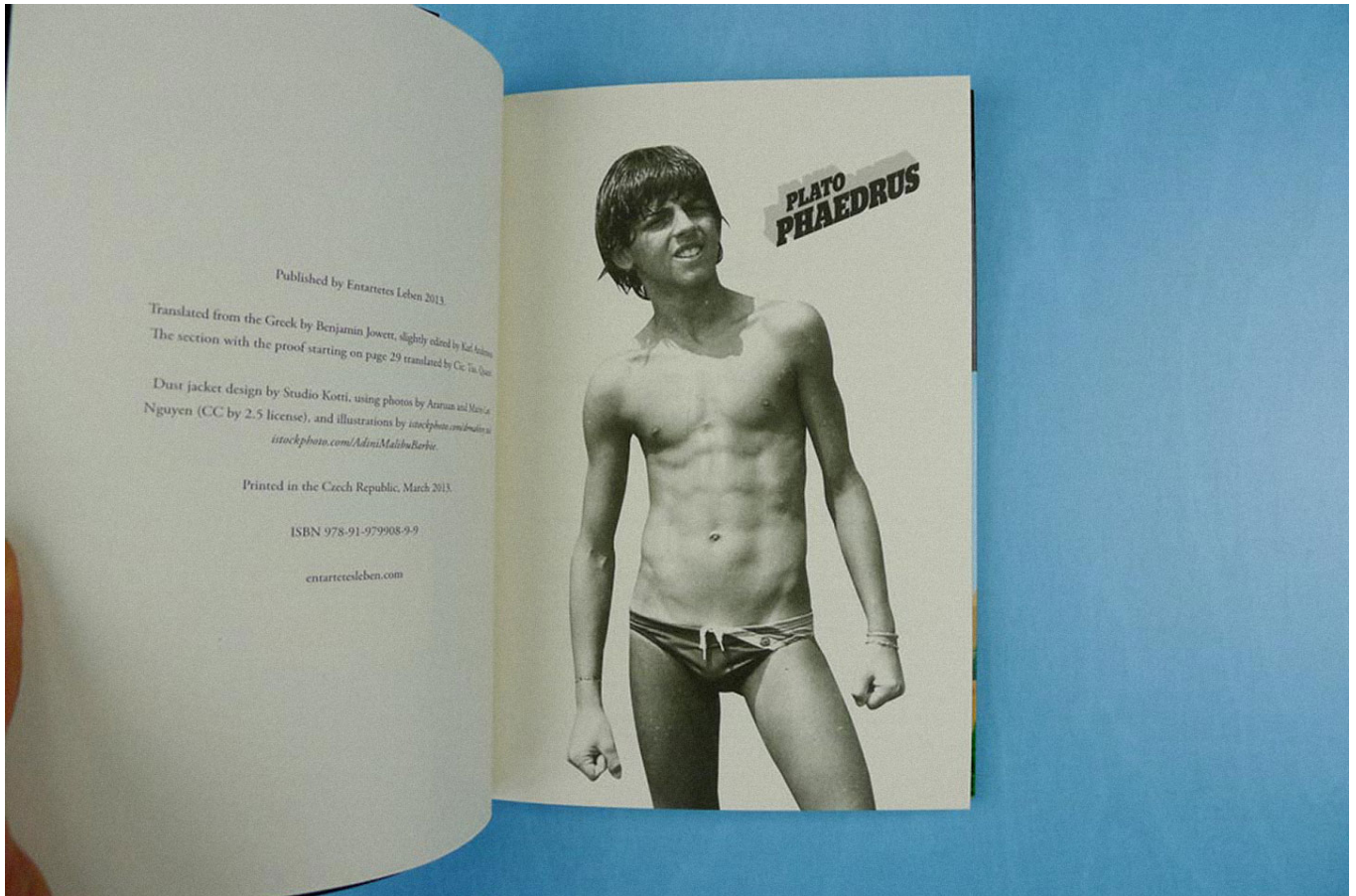
e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Theodor W. Adorno
On the Concept of Beauty

December 16, 1958

It is my intention to introduce the consideration of the central aesthetic concept, namely the concept of beauty, by discussing one of the first major texts to contain something like a theory of beauty. The text in question is a section from Plato's *Phaedrus*, approximately chapters 30 to 32 according to the famous Stephanus pagination.¹

Now, you could say first of all that it is rather strange to begin an examination of the concept of beauty by drawing on a passage of a somewhat mythological, dogmatic and certainly pre-critical character such as this one by Plato. I have chosen this passage because it demonstrates that Plato was a philosopher after all, not a mythologist; that is, all of the decisive motifs which later appear in the philosophical theory of beauty are collected in this exegesis, somewhat akin to the way that, in the introductions to certain great symphonies, the most important themes are present as if under glass and are then developed in the course of the symphony itself. So I can here present to you *in statu nascendi*, as it were in an almost prehistoric form, the motifs that dominate the discussion of the concept of beauty.

Phaedrus is one of the thinker's most complicated and enigmatic works, so complicated that it is almost impossible to point to a general theme of this dialogue. It begins as a discussion of a sophistic speech about love in which a starkly sophistic claim is made, namely that the only true lover is the one who does not love himself.² This thesis, which is presented to Socrates by a youth, a young student of the Sophists – Phaedrus – is then corrected by Socrates, one might say, in the sense that he immanently criticizes it and outdoes it in a speech that is both more internally rigorous and more virtuosic.³ This, however, is suddenly followed by a magnificent rupture. The entire approach up to that point is abandoned, and we are instead offered a doctrine of love that corresponds to Socratic theory itself, and which is mostly based on the motif of re-remembering, or anamnesis.⁴ And let me say it already: what the Platonic theory of beauty essentially states is that the power of beauty comes from the fact that we recognize the Form – or whatever it is – in the objects or people we have reason to call beautiful.⁵ It is this splendid motif of pain and longing, which seizes people in the face of beauty, that was formulated for the first time and in the most outstanding fashion in this dialogue. This interpretation is then followed by a third part, which also has a very typical Platonic form that I would like to place in the category of return. This means that now the soul, saturated with the experiences gathered by philosophy



Plato's *Phaedrus* is revamped by Entartetes Leben in a 2013 reprint.

after turning towards its highest objects, namely the Forms, returns to the earth and now brings the sublime – to use one of Kierkegaard's terms⁶ – into the pedestrian.⁷ This Platonic motif, incidentally, went on to play a tremendous part in German classicism too; one need think only of Faust's "I weep, I am for the earth again" to understand that.⁸

I would strongly encourage all of you, if you occupy yourselves at all with aesthetics, to read the *Phaedrus* in its entirety; for one must simply recognize it as one of the greatest basic texts in the whole of Western metaphysics ... One of its central "themes" is the relationship between reason and madness⁹ ... [At the turning point of the dialogue] Socrates – referring, perhaps in mild jest, to nymphs – shows himself seized by enthusiasm and leaves the rational realm.¹⁰ There is an entirely systematic reason for this in Platonic philosophy. Platonic philosophy as a whole has a peculiar twofold character, for it is rational or, to use its own terminology, dialectical, meaning that it consists in the definition and development of concepts – both the abstraction and the classification of concepts – yet is not limited to this but rather – in order for the concept indeed to become what it really is, namely the objectively valid idea – it is

03/08

joined by that very aspect of *enthousiasmos*, or divine madness, which Plato deems the element in which the highest truth discloses itself, albeit only as a sudden flash:¹¹ until, having experienced it, we carry out that return which is so fundamental to Platonic philosophy. And it is from this defense of madness against rationality – one could almost say: against stupidity – it is from this justification of delirium, and really an erotic delirium, that Plato's theory of beauty follows. He presents intense emotion in the face of beauty as one of those forms of madness which is wiser than the usual wisdom of reason. I had to tell you this much so that you would understand what I will now read you, and then interpret in some detail. So, we read in chapter 30:

"Now we reach the point to which the whole discussion of the fourth kind of madness was tending. This fourth kind of madness is the kind which occurs when someone sees beauty here on earth and is reminded of true beauty. His wings begin to grow ..."

– "wings begin to grow" is a reference to the central parable that precedes this,¹² but which I shall not discuss now –



Frontispiece of Pieter Burman's *Phaedrus's Fables*, 1698.

“and he wants to take to the air on his new plumage, but he cannot; like a bird he looks upwards, and because he ignores what is down here, he is accused of behaving like a madman. So the point is that this turns out to be the most thoroughly good of all kinds of possession, not only for the man who is possessed, but also for anyone who is touched by it, and the word “lover” refers to a lover of beauty who has been possessed by this kind of madness. For, as I have already said, the soul of every human being is bound to have seen things as they really are, or else it would not have entered this kind of living creature. But not every soul is readily prompted by things here on earth to recall those things that are real. This is not easy for a soul which caught only a brief glimpse of things there, nor for those which after falling to earth have suffered the misfortune of being perverted and made immoral by the company they keep and have forgotten the sacred things they saw then.”

That almost sounds like Hölderlin.¹³

“When the remaining few, whose memories are good enough, see a likeness here which reminds them of things there, they are amazed and beside themselves, but they do not understand what is happening to them because of a certain unclarity in their perceptions. But although the likenesses here on earth (of things which are precious to souls, such as justice and self-control) ...”

– in the catalogue of Platonic virtues, these are among the cardinal ones; *dikaiosune*, justice, is the highest virtue, and *sophrosune*, which is here termed “self-control,” is really the ability to maintain a balance between the extremes of the other virtues¹⁴ –

“... lack all lustre, and only a few people come to them and barely see, through dim sense organs, what it is that any likeness is a likeness of, yet earlier it was possible for them to see beauty in all its brilliance. That was when – we as attendants of Zeus and others of one of the other gods – as part of a happy company they saw a wonderful sight and spectacle and were initiated into what we may rightly call the most wonderful of the mysteries. When we celebrated these mysteries then, we were not only perfect beings ourselves, untouched by all the troubles which

awaited us later”

– that is, on earth –

“but we also were initiated into and contemplated things shown to us that were perfect, simple, stable and blissful. We were surrounded by rays of pure light, being pure ourselves and untainted by this object we call a ‘body’ and which we carry around with us now, imprisoned like shellfish.”¹⁵

The final parable, incidentally, is a kind of aesthetic variation, one could almost say, on one of the most famous passages in the *Phaedo*, to which the whole of Christian theology then referred back, namely, the doctrine of a body as a prison from which the soul must be saved, from which the soul must flee.

Beauty appears here as a form of madness. [In earlier lectures] we said that the aesthetic realm or the experience of art as such is a suspension of the so-called reality principle; that we behave aesthetically the moment we – to put it quite bluntly – are not realistic, the moment we do not wisely consider our advantage our progress or whatever goals we may have but, rather, surrender ourselves to something that is-in-itself, or at least presents itself thus, without regard for the context of purposes. It goes without saying that this behavior, which I have characterized positively to you, always has the aspect of folly as its negative, of that which falls short of reality; and when a well-known politician, namely the interior minister of North Rhine Westphalia, recently saw fit to warn of aesthetic experiments which the majority of people consider over the top,¹⁶ this phrase “over the top” in fact encapsulated precisely the very element which gives life to art. So as soon as what appears here as madness – that aspect of not staying on the middle path of reason – is not suspended, as soon as there is no enthusiasm that elevates itself above attachment to purposes and where people are concretist – then something like art does not actually exist. But something else is closely connected to this: the fact that this madness seizes people only because they are not themselves in control of the unconditional thing which they imagine beauty to be. In other words, then, the conditional nature of humans is the precondition for the specific experience of beauty as such. The relationship with beauty could then be understood – and we will find a very specific definition of this in Plato – as a state of tension between the conditional and the unconditional, as that emotion, that movement which seizes conditional beings in the face of the unconditional and now lifts them above the vicinity of conditionality itself, at least

04/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Theodor W. Adorno
On the Concept of Beauty

temporarily, for as long as they observe beauty. In all this, of course, one already finds a clear prefiguring of such motifs as Kant's "disinterested pleasure" – that is, a pleasure which is not directed at goals, at practical aspects within the context of self-preservation and control of nature but, rather, goes beyond all that.

And if I mention here the aspect of pain, which is one of the fundamental components of any experience of beauty, then the reason for this pain in the sense of Plato's theory – and this too is a very intense experience – is that, in the face of beauty, namely in the experience of the possibility of something unconditional, humans become aware of their own conditionality, their own fallibility. This pain and suffering is, in a sense, the only form in which we, as conditional creatures, can think, feel, or experience Utopia at all – for, as Plato says, we are not in control of it. If we were to see beauty in its primal image, our entire life would be suspended; we can experience it only in a state of yearning, only in the form of the rupture separating us from it, and herein already lies, beyond a substantially dynamic aspect to the experience of beauty, precisely this: that suffering, pain, and dissonance are fundamental parts of beauty, not

05/08

simply accidental. You can see from this how far a classical thinker – and if the term "classical" was ever rightly applied to a philosophy, it is surely Plato's – is superior in the impulses of his thought, how far beneath him are the things one generally associates with the notion of the "classical."

I would also like to point out to you that Plato does not define beauty at this point, and I can already tell you now that the passages I will subsequently read to you and interpret further likewise contain no such definition. With a philosopher who took the art of separating, forming, and defining concepts to such a high level as Plato, this is already extremely notable, though here too I can perhaps add the general philosophical observation that, if one looks at the Platonic dialogues – including those from his earlier period – which seem to move towards definitions, one will always find that they ultimately withhold the definition and end with a *non liquet*, with an element of openness. So Plato's faith in definitions was evidently not remotely as great as the definitory method he chose would suggest. One could almost suspect that – with certain exceptions, of course, like the definition of courage as the midpoint between foolhardiness and cowardice – Plato's definitions



Iomega Phaedrus microchip used on mainboard of Iomega ZIP-100, parallel port printer pass-through.



Phaedrus as a character in Obsidian Entertainment's role-playing videogame *Tyranny*, released in 2016.

are geared more towards thwarting the definitory procedure than affirming it. If things were indeed as I am hinting to you, then Platonic philosophy would be a dialectical philosophy in a sense that already goes considerably beyond what one usually has in mind when speaking of Platonic dialectic, by which people generally mean little more than a method for acquiring insight.

But nonetheless – and this strikes me as decisive, and of the utmost import for the theory of beauty in particular – such a concept does not remain vague in Plato's work, not indeterminate; rather, he brings together a wealth of aspects through whose constellation one could say beauty sustains itself. I have told you about a few of them, such as self-elevation, madness, or all these things; there is another crucial element referred to here in the text I read to you, known as being "initiated." This initiated status quite simply means that the realm of beauty is characterized by being a secularized magical realm; that is, it removes itself from the everyday context of effects into a form of taboo area and in this context of effects, it is something autonomous that one needs to have experienced, needs to have entered to see at all what is going on in a work of art. Anyone who approaches a work of art directly with the categories of everyday life, with the thoughts, feelings, and impulses one has at some moment without, I would almost say, carrying out a kind of reduction, without entering this circle and leaving their jacket outside, as is rightly expected of us in the theater, will thus deny themselves the experience of art as such from the outset.

Plato defines beauty here by its – if I should speak of definitions at all; let me correct myself: Plato seeks to determine the concept of beauty at this point by its effect, namely the effect it has on us. You could call this paradoxical – and say that Plato, in that sense, belongs to the domain of aesthetic subjectivism, the critique of which we will pursue in detail in the next sessions, because I feel that this critique is the most decisive element in a reformulation of aesthetics as such.

On the other hand, if you want to understand this theory of beauty we are dealing with here as a complexion of aspects, not as a definition of beauty – this very fact that we feel beauty only through its effect must be shown with reference to its objective nature: its character as an archetype and its special position within the realm of ideas. What I have just told you, and what initially sounds like a rather philological observation – namely that, on the one hand, Plato seeks to explain beauty only in terms of its effect, but, on the other hand, beauty is supposed to be nothing but the

imitation of the idea of beauty – this seemingly merely exegetic remark on the Plato passage is, if I am not mistaken, of the most central imaginable significance for the establishment of an aesthetics. For it means that neither can we explain the idea of beauty or the idea of art as such in directly objectivist terms – that is to say, without reflection on the spirit, without reflection on humans and their attitude towards objectivity – nor, on the other hand, is this idea of art or this idea of beauty limited to the context of effects that it imposes on us; rather, it is essentially objective and has an objective aspect. In other words: if I could already formulate here the polarity which one encounters in Plato, if one does not wish crudely to impose an inconsistent theory on him, one must say that the underlying conception of beauty itself here is a dialectical conception of beauty. This means that beauty itself, by its own nature, presents itself as mediated, inherently as something like a tension between subjective and objective aspects. And when I told you that all the motifs of aesthetics that ever unfolded in later times are already present here, as if in a kind of sacred foundational text, then this is primarily what I had in mind. For even at its highest peak, at the Hegelian peak, aesthetic speculation did not get any further than that definition of beauty which termed beauty itself – instead of calling it being in a static, object-like sense – just such a state of tension between subjective and objective aspects.

But I would at least like to say a word about the characterization of the effect of beauty which Plato provides here. For this description indeed differs fundamentally from the modern, Christianity-based description of beauty in that it does not similarly make disinterested pleasure – that is to say, the elimination of desire from the object of beauty – a self-evident precondition for the experience of beauty.¹⁷ In this, Plato is simply closer to certain primary experiences of beauty – which withdrew ever further and, if you will, were repressed ever more in the further formation and development of art – such that he openly admits the relationship between beauty and desire of which I spoke to you at length when we discussed the relationship between nature and art. First of all, beauty for him is directly an object of desire, and only the result of a process that takes place within the concept of beauty itself, if you will, which at the very least takes place in the experience of beauty, namely that that sublimation occurs – that abstention of the experience of beauty from immediate erotic appropriation – which is already predetermined for us when we believe we are acting aesthetically. So here you gain insight into a piece of the hidden prehistory of beauty, one

could say, into a process that is present in the later conceptions of aesthetics – I am thinking primarily of Kant’s of course – in a congealed, an object-like form ... In Plato, the theory of beauty is substantially dynamic and envisages beauty as something trembling or in internal motion. He describes the experience of beauty itself as an inalienable and constantly self-renewing process of sublimation. At the same time, you can see here whence that aspect of danger comes that plays such a large part in Plato’s theory of beauty: the sublimation which characterizes the realm of beauty is a very precarious one – it never fully succeeds. That taboo domain separated off from reality which we experience as the domain of beauty is problematic, for the most profound reasons, namely due to its inner character, and that it can end again at any time. In a sense – at that moment of sublimation, in its distancing from the realm of the immediacy of purposes – the potential for collapse is inherent in the idea of beauty itself: that the aesthetic distance is not maintained, and that the aesthetic subject either falls back into the sphere of the merely existent, the sphere of self-preservation, of immediate desire, or that it indeed loses itself in that madness of which Plato very rightly says that it is an integral aspect of the experience of beauty as such.

×

This text is excerpted from Aesthetics by Theodor W. Adorno, a collection of the author's lectures on aesthetics delivered in the winter of 1958–59. The volume is edited by Eberhard Ortland, translated by Wieland Hoban, and published this month by Polity.

08/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Theodor W. Adorno
On the Concept of Beauty

1
For this lecture, Adorno used the translation of the *Phaedrus* by Constantin Ritter, in *Platon, Sämtliche Dialoge*, ed. Otto Apelt, vol. 2: *Menon – Kratyllos – Phaidon – Phaidros* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1922). His personal copy is located in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive (NB Adorno 40). Adorno further consulted the English translation by B. Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1937); this also includes annotations to the passages from the *Phaedrus* discussed in this lecture (NB Adorno 49, pp. 250–54). The Stephanus pagination, which is normally used for Plato’s works, is based on the page and section numbers from the three-volume edition by Henricus Stephanus (Paris, 1578). The chapter numbers given here by Adorno refer not to the Stephanus, however, but to the Apelt; they were presumably also adopted in the paperback edition of the Schleiermacher translation, which most of Adorno’s students would probably have used. (*Platon, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Walter F. Otto, Ernesto Grassi, and Gert Plamböck, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1958). The chapters in the *Phaedrus* correspond to sections 249d–252c. (In these notes, all references correspond to the edition of *Phaedrus* published by Oxford University Press in 2002 and translated by Robin Waterfield. – Trans.)

2
See the speech by Lysias in the *Phaedrus* (227c). In his personal copy, Adorno noted the name “Proust” next to the sentence quoted here.

3
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 15ff. (237a ff.).

4
See *ibid.*, 25ff. (244a ff.); concerning the doctrine of anamnesis, see, especially, *Phaedrus* 250a, *Phaidon* 72e–77a, and *Menon* 80d.

5
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33 (250b).

6
See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34: “To transform the leap of life into a gait, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian – that only the knight of faith can do – and that is the only miracle.” Adorno quotes this passage in *Kierkegaard* (129) and repeatedly returns to it later, for example, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Fredric Will (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

7
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 35f. (252a–c).

8
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

Faust, Part One (1808), trans. David Constantine (London: Penguin, 2005), 29.

9
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33 (249c–d).

10
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 23 (241e).

11
See, in addition to the passage from the *Phaedrus*, also Plato’s *Ion* 533d–e and *Timaeus* 71e–72a. See also Hermann Gundert, “Enthusiasmus und Logos bei Platon,” *Lexis* 2 (1949), 25–46.

12
See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28f. (246a ff.).

13
This association may refer to Hölderlin’s hymn “Patmos,” (1802); see Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1998), 231–42.

14
See Eduard Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Part 2, Section 1, *Sokrates und die Sokratiker; Plato und die Alte Akademie* (Leipzig: Reisland, 1922), especially 882–86.

15
Plato, *Phaedrus*, 33f (249d–250c). Adorno’s personal copy of the *Phaedrus* contains the note “Body as prison / Phaedo” next to the quoted passage.

16
Neither the wording nor the occasion of this statement by Josef Hermann Dufhues, a leading member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1958 to 1962, could be ascertained.

17
Concerning the “elimination of desire from the object of beauty” as a basic element of the Christian approach to beauty, see Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. Frank J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), Book 4, chapter 13ff.