**beauty/美(Měi)**

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The present document results from the recording of a debate on the various representations of beauty according to cultures. The debate focused on Umberto Eco and was organized in November 2008 by Transcultura at its headquarters located at Lycée Louis Le Grand. Umberto Eco’s presentation referred to his masterful book: *History of Beauty*. He was followed by Zhao Tingyang, for Chinese culture, Balveer Arora for India, Moussa Sow for Mali and Jesus Garcia Ruiz for Latin America. This is the transcription of Umberto Eco’s intervention in French, translated into English:

*Umberto Eco: No concept of civilization is equal to another or can be translated with the same term. If we say "*pauvre*", "poor" in French, we do not mean the same thing in Chinese and sometimes we may translate by way of mathematical concepts, such as multiplication or subtraction. I am not sure. Not even the concept of gods which, of course, can change. Or the concept of love. Or whatever you want. So we have been going on for a long time trying to make comparisons, overlapping... superimposing... That is to say, we have not been looking for identities, but for equations like that, where there are elements in common but also other elements. If I had a blackboard, I would have made two intersecting circles... For example, Zhao Tingyang, who is not here, sent half a page of what he would have said. And at a certain point, he seems to be saying something that I too would say: in ancient China as in Greece or the Middle Ages, there was no difference between the good and the beautiful. But right afterwards, Zhao gives a definition of beauty which is not Western. Indeed in Western civilization, we thought about the similarity between the good and the beautiful until the end of the Middle Ages, perhaps the Renaissance… After that, we stopped. The one who kept thinking about it was Victor Cousin… And that's why we gave his name to the little street next to here… So it's very interesting to experiment like that tonight and to confront those experiments... It's a problem that I experienced recently because I wrote a history of beauty and a history of ugliness, and I was compelled to talk about Western notions only, which gave me the impression of a certain ethnocentrism. But I tried to explain that we never know what that word means in another civilization...*

*Venus of Willendorf*

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*Please observe this lady: obviously, when she was sculpted in a somewhat ancient era, she represented absolute beauty, evidently identified with a certain idea of fecundity, with the ability to have babies and to feed them. Obviously, very few of the gentlemen present here would go out to dinner with this lady, let alone spend the rest of the night with her... So you can see that, even within our Western culture, notions of beauty can change.*

*[Picture of mask]*

*We do not know here if an African mask of this kind, through the action which it had produced, brings about – or brought about – a sacred terror, or if it conveyed a sense of peace or hilarity. We have no way of knowing. And maybe even Africans no longer know that today either… I remember that when we were in Mali, we were taken to a museum of Malian culture. And there were two kinds of very, very realistic statues of women in classical clothing: one was very thin, very… much like Naomi Campbell, and the other one was a woman of a certain… frame. And the African anthropologist who was showing us around smiled at us and said: "You see, the thin one, we displayed it for you Europeans. Because to us, the beauty is the other one." But he said that with a smile! That is to say, he was already, if you will, corrupted by the contact between two cultures, he already had a vast knowledge of Western art and history. He even knew that the other one was very beautiful, and maybe in his heart he preferred the one who looked like Naomi Campbell, or the other one…*

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***Rita Hayworth***

*But you can see how, even within the same culture, there can be disparities, differences between two conceptions of beauty. Imagine yourself between two different cultures… Furthermore, imagine someone who has just arrived and who has never visited Western culture: he could not imagine the feeling of pity, of affection, perhaps of serenity, of a wounded, scourged, bruised Christ, such as this one can create in the soul of a Christian.*

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*Christ of Goya, Prado National Museum*

*That person might think that on the contrary, it is a representation of something that, for us, would be a horror movie, something gory. And even when we talk about civilizations that we think we know very well, great cultures like the Indian one or the Chinese one, etc., even if we are familiar with many images from those civilizations, we always find ourselves embarrassed when it comes to the association of our own concepts with what we see. During a trip to India, one of my interventions concerned a central concept of Indian aesthetics which is called the "*raja*". And because I had read a lot about the history of* raja *aesthetics, I knew that in Western languages, it is translated by "taste", the equivalent of "*goût*" in French, of "*gusto*" in Italian. I did a one-hour-long analysis to demonstrate that there was nothing in common between our conception of taste and the Indian conception of* raja*. I say that the same contradiction is found within our very culture. If you have ever been interested in the history of aesthetics, in the conception of beauty, you have found that one of the almost universal characteristics of beauty in all philosophies is proportion. The light, the proportion. What is beautiful is in proportion. Now, tell me if your notion of proportion corresponds to this… To this?*

*[picture]*

*This is a medieval picture of a well-proportioned man... Here is another picture of a well-proportioned man... There we step into the Renaissance and we see another conception, a mathematical and geometric conception of proportion... This is a Leonardo da Vinci – not Dan Brown’s da Vinci… And this is a German or Flemish virgin… This is an Italian spring… A Venus by Titian…*

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*Tell me which work you think represents the model of proportion? Obviously, each of these women represents a model of a well-proportioned body for her age. For her age… If we had moved on to Rubens’s women, once again, there would have been the problem of choosing which one to take to dinner, one of Rubens’s women or the stone woman that we saw earlier? Because if you have to live extraordinary adventures, you might as well try everything... So considering proportion, a medieval philosopher thinks of a Gothic cathedral, whereas a Renaissance theorist thinks of a 16th century temple, the parts of which are governed by the golden ratio. The Renaissance aesthetics considered the proportions of cathedrals barbaric, precisely Gothic. The concepts of beauty and ugliness are related to historical periods and cultures. And to quote Xenophanes, in his pre-Socratic era: “If oxen and horses and lions had hands and could paint with their hands and produce works like men, horses would paint their gods as horses, oxen would paint theirs as oxen, in short, as images similar to the animals of their species. And in the Middle Ages, Jacques de Vitry, praising the beauty of the entire divine creation, admitted that the cyclops with his one eye would probably be surprised at those who have two, just as we marvel at three-eyed creatures. We consider black Ethiopians beautiful, but they say among each other that the blackest is considered the most beautiful. And centuries later, Voltaire said: "Ask a he-toad what beauty is, supreme beauty, the* to kalon*. He will answer that it is his she-toad with her two big round eyes coming out of her little head, a wide, flat mouth, a yellow belly, a brown back. Ask a coloured person from Guinea: beauty for him is black, oily skin, sunken eyes, a flat nose. Ask the devil, he will tell you that beauty is a pair of horns, four claws and a tail." And I wonder what the notion of beauty is for dogs... Take the one who was elected two years ago by us human beings the ugliest dog in the world: I wonder if, with a jury of female dogs, he would instead have received the title of "Mister Dog" or something like that. I said that in the past, we identified the good with the beautiful. You are in high school, so you know that for the Greeks, the height of virtue was the kalos kagatos: beautiful and good.*

*And I told you that in traditional China there was the same idea. I believe that we should not give too much importance to this identification which only means that we consider beauty to be a positive thing. Obviously, it seems that what everyone calls "beautiful", even if it's the she-toad for the he-toad, is something that gives pleasure: the beautiful is therefore identified with the good. And that is something very good. That is to say, the philosophical conception is so vast and general that it means nothing. At certain times, one could say that what happened in the Middle Ages with the dispute around transcendence, around being beautiful, around the soul, etc., of the similarity between the good and the beautiful sometimes supported a moralist notion, a morality of art… But that wasn't so important because we found a series of shortcuts. The first is that there is quite a philosophical value which is that we call "good" what we like, but also what we would like to possess. Good things are endless: shared love, honest wealth, well-prepared meals... And in all these cases, we want to have this good, even if it is what we call "moral good", heroic acts. It is not that we would like to die a hero, but we would like to have done the same acts as a hero and preferably without dying. In any case, we would be very, very happy about that. That is, as far as being good is what stimulates our desire, our desire in the most general and purest sense of the word. Now conversely, in all philosophical definitions, not only the modern ones, but also those from antiquity, when we speak of beauty, we refer to something that we admire regardless of the fact that we possess it. A cake in the window of a baker’s is good insofar as we would like to eat it. It is beautiful insofar as even in case of very high blood sugar, which prevents us from eating cakes, we still admire it for its beautiful shape, its colors. In the Middle Ages, they said, "*bonum respigit appetitum*", which concerns desire. "*Vulcum respigit vim cognositim*": it is only a fact of knowledge, of detachment, and that was said a few centuries before Kant and his ideas on beauty. The second shortcut is that art can very well represent the ugly. And all philosophers said that the devil is evidently ugly. It is obvious that infernal creatures are ugly. But when they are well represented, their representations become beautiful. And so, they also become good, even if it is a representation of evil. Another shortcut is that the whole universe is beautiful, because it is the work of God, and because in the harmony of the universe, even what we consider ugly contributes to the general beauty. Thus, shadows and chiaroscuro can contribute to the beauty of a painting. So, if in a painting only the dark world is isolated, it can be seen, but looking at the whole painting, we understand that everything plays its role. So even the monsters, etc., in the harmony of the universe, though maybe horrible at first sight, are beautiful as elements of the universal concert. Finally, there is another phenomenon that shows that the close relationship between beauty and art as established by the modern era is not as obvious as one might think. In Greek civilization as well as in medieval civilization, and also in part of the Renaissance, art did not have so much to do with beauty. Art was a way of producing a lot of things that worked well. So there was the shipbuilder's art, the painter's art, the architect's art, paper art, the surgeon's art, and so on. Beauty, the fusion of the beauty of nature, natural beauty, the beauty of a landscape, in the modern world, is almost toppled: beauty was ushered into the domain of art with idealistic aesthetics, etc., with the idea that there is beauty in art only, that there is no beauty in nature, that there is no such thing as the beauty of nature. I wonder if in other civilizations this radical toppling occurred as it did in ours. It is no coincidence that it was only at some point that we began to speak of "fine arts".*

The concept of beauty, along with the concept of the image, has been at the heart of Transcultura's thinking since its creation. In 2000, at the turn of the third millennium, Transcultura had a meeting at the invitation of Prof. Moussa Sow and the Institute of Human Sciences of Mali, in Timbuktu. Umberto Eco had long dreamed of this mythical place in the imaginary map of the discovery of the world. It appeared in the record of the fabulous journeys he described in his cross-cultural analyses of the travels of Marco Polo or the legendary story of Prester John.

The Timbuktu seminar on the semantics of reciprocal representations of the Other was held in the famous Library of Timbuktu, shortly before it was destroyed by Al Aqmi along with the secular tombs, remains and monuments of the city, was a turning point in the Dictionary of Misunderstandings project and in the history of Transcultura.

Then and there we wanted, and so did Umberto Eco, to settle on the "Discourse on the method" or methodology of this Encyclopedia of key words, at the heart of Transcultura's research. It was then decided with Umberto and lexicologist Alain Rey to launch the project of the Dictionary of Misunderstandings by bringing together the partners of the project more widely in a first stage, according to a triangular configuration made of Africa, Asia, and Europe. This proposal materialized the following year with the organization in the European Parliament of the Convention of Reciprocal Knowledge.

However, during the concluding debate of the seminar that we held in Mopti, it appeared that the question of the image was the crux of the matter and that in its theoretical scope, the project should include it, and could be formulated as an Encyclopaedia of key words, concepts and images.

A particular session in Timbuktu was dedicated to the concept of beauty. Transcultura China was represented by anthropologist Wang Mingming, as Zhao Tinyang had had to stay in Paris for lack of a Malian visa. Philosopher François Julien dealt with the concept of beauty in Chinese thought. Pointing out that the representation of the naked body, fundamental in Western art, was absent from Chinese art, he posed the question of the meaning of this absence, which he linked to the philosophical question of its conceptualization, as he thought that nudity was the essence of the concept. After the seminar, as we admired the beauty of the River Niger in Mopti, Wang Mingming observed, ironically, that following that hypothesis, it was difficult for a Chinese person to take part in a debate on beauty...

Another particularly significant moment of this meeting in Mali was our visit to the National Art Museum of Mali. The Malian curator who commented on the visit lingered for a long time in front of two female figurines which, he told us, were supposed to represent the ideal of traditional African beauty for one, and beauty according to more contemporary criteria for the other. Those are the two figurines that Umberto Eco mentions in his speech, and that we could not, unfortunately, find pictures for.

Zhao Tingyang, however, taking up the challenge contained in Wang Mingming's ironical remark, came to take part in the debate on the concept of Beauty in November 2008. Thus, he started, with Umberto Eco, to put things into perspective, which eventually lead to the current Dictionary of Misunderstandings project. He asked Prof. … to present the Chinese vision today.

The great breadth of both Umberto Eco's intervention and the Chinese perspective shows the importance of this confrontation, of this meeting. It also shows how much the question of image is at the heart of our debate and deserves to be taken into account in its future development.